save rock and roll

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by satsukichan

Summary

Everyone has heard of Akechi Incident- you can't turn on the radio without hearing their new hit single, or open up your browser without seeing photos of Uzu Sanageyama stumbling out of yet another club. When Ryuko's indie punk band Freshbloods opens for them at a show, a chain reaction unfolds that will forever change the face of the music industry.

bad reputation

Chapter Summary

I don't give a damn 'bout my reputation
You're living in the past, it's a new generation
A girl can do what she wants to do and that's what I'm gonna do

An' I don't give a damn 'bout my bad reputation
Oh no, not me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Are we *really* an internet sensation?"

"Does anybody really give a fuck? It'll make us sound cooler."

They were a sight to behold- two figures with matching dark ponytails bent over the laptop of a slender young woman with a prominent red streak in her hair. "Whoever did this last mixed up your birthday with Mako's."

"Shit, you're right. Good one, Senketsu."

A very buff man in a worn out Sex Pistols shirt with the sleeves removed poked his head through the doorway. "Ryuko, how about some coffee?"

"In a minute. I'm busy editing our Wikipedia article."

"Again?"

"Yeah, can you believe these fuckwits keep messing with it?"

Senketsu and Tsumugu made eye contact, and then, almost as if on cue, both let out a deep sigh. "Are they fans of that one chick-"

"Yeah."

"Why do you insist on picking fights on twitter?"

"She called me a tryhard internet fad and a skank. Drastic measures had to be taken."

Tsumugu ran a hand through his mohawk. "Our lives would be a lot easier if you didn't keep pulling shit like this."

"I'm not gonna back down from a challenge like that, you know."

This time it was Senketsu that scoffed. "Believe me, we know. We lose advertisers every time you make news. How are we going to pay for our gas? Repairs? A better place to spend the night?"

He gestured vaguely around him. It was a sleazy motel room, far past its prime, with the paint peeling off the walls in wide strips. The sheets were off white with too many suspicious stains for anyone to feel comfortable sleeping on. The single solitary bed was shoved to the side and piled high with their instruments- the only things they felt safe putting onto it. Ryuko squinted at the mess, paused, and then shrugged.

"The bandcamp sales are keeping us fed. What's the problem?"

"This hotel sucks. We need more cash for important things."

"Like?"

"A better living situation?"

“Duuuude, the digital sales will pay for some burgers. Next time we play a bar, I can get free drinks and score us some good weed. We’ll be fine.”

“Shouldn’t you worry more about gas and a nicer hotel room?”

“Shut up, *mom*. What’s wrong with this place?” She waved a hand around the skeevy room airily. Their luggage was piled into a corner, and Mako was still asleep on the floor, clothed in only an oversized shirt from their leftover stock.

“There are cockroaches in the sink and you can almost smell the STIs in here. I’m not touching that bed.”

“Go sleep in the car with Tsumugu, then.”

The muscular man visibly flinched. Senketsu’s face drooped. Ryuko pierced him with a death glare.

Maybe he felt bad, because he sighed. “Fine. But I get the backseat.”

“THANK YOU. See, it’s not that hard to be civil.”

A particularly loud snore brought their attention south, where a tiny girl straightened up from underneath Tsumugu’s leather jacket. “Why is everyone yelling? Why are y’all up so early?”

“Mako, it’s 1 PM.”

“Still early.”

She stretched out and yawned loudly. "Is breakfast ready?"

Senketsu frowned. "We're out of groceries. I can go pick up something to eat for you guys-"

"I'll do it."

Tsumugu put down his mug of subpar instant coffee and grimaced. "McDonalds good for you guys?"

"McDonalds doesn't sound too healthy-"

Tsumugu pierced Senketsu with a withering glare, and jerked his chin at the door. Ryuko glowered at him and rose to her feet. “We’re getting McDonalds, then. Mako, you want the regular?”

“Twenty piece chicken mcnuggets, a chocolate milkshake, two apple pies, large fries, a big mac, and two cheeseburgers, extra onions. Oh, and honey mustard for the mcnuggets. Barbecue if they’re out.”

“Alright. Senketsu, remember to charge yourself, okay?”

“Okay.” He sounded somewhat defeated, but she didn’t have time to dwell on it. Instead, she grabbed Mako's makeshift blanket and handed it to the muscled man. He slid into it easily, the thick leather covered in patches from punk bands she'd never heard of, and was somewhat scared to ask about. She grabbed the enormous letterman jacket she'd hung on the one sad coat hook on the back of their door and slipped outside to follow Tsumugu.

They donned their sunglasses in silence, and she wrapped her arms around his waist as he climbed onto the beautifully maintained, if monstrously proportioned, chopper parked out front. It contrasted sharply with the hideous, destroyed relic of a van with the word "FRESHBLOODS" spraypainted onto the side in bright, chunky red text, and the sleek red motorcycle leaning on its stand. Fondly, she let her eyes linger on it before the chopper roared to life, and she squeezed tightly to stay on as he sped off.

To the casual observer, the two could have looked like a couple, or even siblings, with their matching black hair and dyed red streaks, the cuff on his ear matching the monroe glimmering over her mouth, the same burning eyes and scary patches. It certainly seemed that way, at least, until Tsumugu opened his mouth.

"Why are you making me sleep in the back with that thing?"

"Senketsu is *NOT* a thing!"

"Well, it sure as shit ain't human. I could throw it farther than I trust that monster."

"Senketsu is not a monster! What the fuck is your deal with him? And stop calling him an it!"

“He’s not human.”

“He’s half!”

“It’s the bits that aren’t that worry me. Does he have a human heart?”

“He’s human where it counts, okay.”

"What, does he have a vibrator down there? Is that why you like him so much?"

"God, go suck a bag of cocks."

"At least I like cock."

"Ooh, what a *burn*. How is it that I, raging queer extraordinaire, don't usually suck dick?"

“Makes two of us. Except for maybe the latter half of that statement-”

“Wow. Thanks for the mental image of you gagging on Aikuro’s pocket rocket.”

“Classy, Matoi.”

“Just choke on my clit, okay? I’d trust Senketsu with my life. My dad left him behind for me.”

"Fair enough. But you know I don't trust anything that walks and talks requires a charger to function. I don't like him."

"Androids aren't that bad, I promise. I've known Senketsu since high school."

"Where all you did, according to Mako, was smoke weed and pick fights."

"I still do that."

"My point exactly."

“Get bent,” she grumbled under her breath.

He didn't catch the words, but he sighed anyway. "Let me give you two useful pieces of information. One, I’ll sleep in the car with him, but only the once. Two, we’re getting a new hotel room. We’re going to have to take the next gig we get, no matter what it is.”

“Whatever. I just want to eat something that isn’t microwaved or deep fried sometime soon.”

Tsumugu didn't respond. The wind blowing past their faces whipped her hair into her eyes as he leaned into a turn, and she reluctantly held on tighter for fear of falling off.

"Let's eat!"

Mako slapped her hands together and then, with no hesitation, tore into the mcnuggets. Rather than witness the horrible deaths of the fried chicken pieces, Ryuko bit half heartedly into her quarter pounder. It was hard to enjoy her burger when the reminder of how light her

wallet was echoed in her head. They had maybe two days of junk food money left before they'd have to resort to the cup noodles Tsumugu insisted on buying in bulk. That was, of course, assuming their tanks didn't hit empty before then.

The mohawked man chewed his chicken ranch wrap with obvious distaste. Whenever they could afford groceries, he preferred to cook something fresh for them. It'd been a week and a half since their last check, and at least three months since they'd last been able to afford to eat well.

The chewing echoed grimly against the paper thin walls. Ryuko watched Tsumugu half heartedly take another bite of the wan grilled chicken and wilted lettuce, before he sighed and set the remains of his lunch back onto the wax paper wrapper.

"We could use some background music," he muttered, finally, and reached for the battered radio alarm clock on the nightstand. It screeched to life, static making her teeth curl, before a familiar, upbeat song blared out of the tinny speakers, bass shaking it so hard it rattled. The last few lines died out, and a bored college announcer spoke, voice crackling and distorted by the near-useless machine.

"That was "Adolescent" by Akechi Incident, the new single off their upcoming third album, ‘Dress Coded’. Next up, we-"

Tsumugu's hand slammed down onto the machine so hard it bounced off its stand and onto the matted carpet, momentum pulling the plug from the wall. Mako frowned over the top of her burger. "Hey, Tsumugu, want me to play a song for you?"

"Nah."

"Wanna try something on YouTube?"

"I hate those corporate pigs," he muttered under his breath.

"Who, Google? Or Akechi?”

"Both, but I meant Akechi Incident. They're all a bunch of sellouts, but if we’re going to be honest, you can’t call Akechi Incident a group of sellouts. You can’t sell out if you were made for the mass market from the start.”

Mako tilted her head to the side, eyes fixed on Tsumugu. Her bangs slid into her face, falling below her eyebrows, and Ryuko made a mental note to trim her pixie cut soon. “What do you mean? I think they’re pretty good.”

He sighed deeply and settled into the foldout lawn chair he’d pulled out of the van. Ryuko and Senketsu groaned deeply, exchanging looks and sharing complaints in the same glance.

“Mako, please don’t get him started on Akechi Incident…”

It was too late to stop him. She could on watch in horror as he opened his mouth to recite the speech she’d almost memorized between late night White Castle runs, the taste of weed on her breath and the familiar smell of vomit permeating the shitty upholstery, covered in

suspicious stains and reeking faintly of cheap whiskey. Tsumugu liked to rant about The Establishment a lot, but never worse than when he was high, and always when he was hungry and irritated.

Well, we've got two out of three, she thought, and rummaged in her pocket for a joint. He'd be a lot more fun to deal with if they were both high, but luck wasn't on her side. There was an empty dimebag and a cheap plastic lighter, two nickels, a lint covered altoid mint, and her fingers counted three cigarettes in the carton. Newports. Gross.

There was no way of making sure she'd be able to buy a new carton anytime soon, so it'd be best if she rationed them, but she needed a smoke, if only to keep her nerves calm. His rants always set her on edge, and they were all too hungry and cranky to weather another shouting match or a passive aggressive luggage moving fight. Nobody was in the mood to climb onto the roof to retrieve their instrument, except for maybe Mako, but then again, she was the only one who actually liked eating McDonalds for two weeks straight.

Internally, she weighed the two situations, before pulling a cigarette out with her teeth and fumbling with the temperamental butane lighter, which sparked twice and refused to light. She shook the red plastic gently. Nothing. "Oi, old fart. Toss me your zippo."

"Brat. Buy your own goddamn lighter."

"If you're gonna bitch at me for bumming a light, buy your own friggin' red hair dye."

The exchange was without venom, though, and he reached into his vest and tossed her the engraved lighter, heavy with a fresh refill of ronsonol. She flipped the familiar weight in her hand to look at the words she knew by heart. *To my idiot brother Tsumugu, from Kinue.*

"Are you gonna light up, or what? I need a smoke, too."

Ryuko rolled her eyes at him and flicked her thumb again the wheel in a practiced motion, sticking the end of her cheap cigarette into the open flame. The paper crinkled and burnt, and the smell of tobacco filled the room. She snapped the case close and threw it back, where he caught it in one hand without bothering to look up. His cigarette end burnt red, the familiar ember lighting up the dingy room. They took care to exhale away from Mako, who wrinkled her nose regardless.

"Anyway, like I was saying about Akechi Incident, Mako-"

Her eyes brightened with the genuine enthusiasm only she could bring to the table.

"They're a Revocs construct, carefully designed to appeal to the broader fifteen to twenty five year old market. They sing songs for the kind of privileged sixteen year old kids that wanna feel rebellious when they break into their parent's liquor cabinets with a stolen copy of the key to get drunk on their three hundred dollar bottles of scotch. Their lead singer and guitarist is literally the daughter of the label owner."

"Satsuki Kiryuin? As in the girl with the eyebrows?"

The name of the antichrist put the hate of consumerism into Tsumugu Kinagase. If she didn't know better, she'd have thought his shiver of disgust was a quake of fear. He nodded, irritation plain on his face.

She grinned. "Did you hear what they said about her when they gave her her last grammy? She's being referred to as the Beyonce of rock music now."

"Then someone needs to save rock and roll, because it needs to be ripped from the manicured clutches of the Kiryuins."

"Who the fuck are they?"

"The Kiryuins? The founders, CEOs, majority stockholders of Revocs Records? It's literally the biggest record company-"

"I know what Revocs Records is! But who cares who's running it as long as they're not hiring?"

"You're kidding, right? Please tell me you're kidding."

"What?"

He ran a hand through his mohawk, and for a minute he resembled a rooster with a disheveled crest. "The artists who sign to Revocs are practically guaranteed success. They also have the highest rate of suicides and overdoses and car accidents, usually just as they stop selling albums or fall out of the public favor."

"That's an awful coincidence."

"You'd think, right? But I'm certain Kiryuin's offing them as they stop making money-"

"Don't you dare get Mako hooked on your conspiracy theory bullshit."

He ignored her and continued talking.

"Anyway, Kiryuin's pet project is Akechi Incident, led by her own daughter, and they're factory manufactured to be popular and successful. And it's working."

She rolled her eyes and tapped the hanging ashes off onto the complementary ashtray. Mako was unfortunately completely engrossed. Of course.

"Their sophomore album went platinum. They're huge." Tsumugu took a long drag on his cigarette before looking at the butt and regretfully stubbing it out on a plate. "They don't write their songs, and their entire public image is faker than Ragyo Kiryuin's tits."

"Wait, Ragyo?" Ryuko's eyes widened, and she grabbed at Mako. "Ragyo! Remember? Your mom always had her singles compilation cd on loop!"

"Oh! *Oh!* Remember Flower Crown?"

"God, yes, that was such good song-"

"How did it go? I could never get the lyrics right."

"That's because it's in German, Mako."

"Ohhh. Mom said she was mega popular when she was in high school."

"Yeah. I didn't know she owned Revocs now." They turned to Tsumugu in a single motion, with the practice only best friends and sisters could have. "You sure it's Ragyo?"

"Yeah, it's definitely her."

"Damn. Girls just wanna have funds, indeed."

"Oh! That was a good song too!"

"I know, right?"

He waited for the girls to stop excitedly stop trying to remember the lyrics before he continued. "So Ragyo-"

"Wait," Ryuko's eyebrow quirked up. "How old is she if she's got an adult daughter? Isn't she, like, thirty five?"

"Well, her daughter's at least your age, older, actually, so she's got to be in her forties now."

"Holy shit, how much Botox does it take to stay looking that young?"

"No doubt she's also got a team of plastic surgeons at her beck and call."

"Rich people are fucking incredible," she muttered, and picked up another wan french fry. Tsumugu's eyes flickered towards it, and then back at his pathetic wrap, and sighed deeply. Shrugging, she popped the limp potato product in her mouth and chewed half heartedly, tasting only grease and starch. If she closed her eyes and used her imagination, she could pretend Tsumugu had made an actual dinner.

"Forget Ragyo, we need a gig. I'm not as picky as you are." She slouched further in the splintery wooden seat and shoved her pinky into her ear to dig for some wax. "Even some shitty punk dive bar would be better than this."

"We're always playing dive bars, and they don't pay well enough."

But I can score free drinks. I miss alcohol." She gestured vaguely with her hands. "Next paycheck, we go out drinking together again."

He scoffed. "What, so you can pick more fights with biker gangs?"

"That was only, like, twice."

"Three times, not including the guy on the scooter. And what if I hadn't been there to help you out?"

Faintly, she wondered if he could see her rolling her eyes, leaning back in her chair as she was. "You implying I'd have lost? I'd kill 'em first. Then Mako woulda had to bust me out of jail, because we sure as hell can't afford bail."

The man smirked. "Fair enough." His smile evaporated immediately. "Seriously, though, you are the rowdiest drunk I know."

"You don't have to get your panties in a twist over me, okay? I'll be fine."

"I'm not your dad and I sure as hell ain't your boyfriend, so why is it my job to chaperone you?"

"Your prerogative. Mako did a perfectly good job on her own. I just wanna have a good time, okay."

He huffed. In the silence that followed, only the sound of Mako tapping away at Ryuko's laptop could be heard. She peeked over her shoulder to find her reading some gross tabloid website.

"Mako, don't read that shit. The paparazzi are fucking disgusting."

"Yeah, but since you guys were talkin' about Ragyo, I went and looked her up. I can't believe she's Satsuki Kiryuin's mom. Look at how pretty she was." She clicked on a stray link, and the screen lit up with her face.

Google images displayed dozens of familiar photos- the platinum blonde woman clad in something out of a 80s workout video, singing live, tabloid covers from before she was born discussing her sex life. Ragyo had never gone by her surname, but seeing photos of her as a teenage pop sensation was familiar. Leaning over, she clicked another link with a familiar dark haired beauty. Side by side, the resemblance was obvious. The distinctive arch of their famously thick eyebrows, the large, cold eyes, the similar slope of their noses and the curve of their jaw- it was almost scary to see them look like sisters, twenty five years apart.

"Damn."

"Yeah, really. Guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Mako yawned again. "She's even famous like her mom. I wish I were as cool as Satsuki."

"That makes two of us."

They fell silent again. A loud, obnoxious stomach gurgle broke the quiet after a few seconds, and they turned to Tsumugu, redfaced and sheepish.

"Sorry."

"Tsumugu, eat your goddamn chicken wrap," she snapped, disregarding her stale fries. "You're not going hungry."

He stared at the wax paper and then picked it up. In one fluid motion, he crushed the paper and food into a ball and flung it at the wall. It bounced off, hit a chair, and missed the trash can by three inches.

"Ahh, cocksucker."

Mako looked longingly at the ruined food, a french fry dangling from her mouth like a cigarette. "F-food..."

She'd had enough of Tsumugu's shit today. One hand on Mako's shoulder, she turned to him. "Was that *really* necessary?"

"I'd rather die than eat more of this dog shit."

"What do you want, then? Taco Bell?"

"I want a fucking homecooked meal, alright?"

"Look, we ain't gettin' one, alright? Not until we get a gig-"

Flecks of spit flew from his mouth as he got agitated. "It's your fault we keep losing jobs and advertisers-"

"I'm not gonna let some punk ass bitch insult me-"

"Well, *MAYBE,* If you could only learn to fucking stop *fighting*-"

A muffled noise broke through the increasingly loud voices. She squinted at her jacket and then shoved a hand into one of its cavernous pockets. No one said anything, just watched her rummage around until she pulled out her phone, blaring music. Confusion set in. The only people who ever called her were in the room with her. One glance at the caller ID was no help.

"A private number?"

She pressed accept in the middle of some line about needing directions and held it to her ear. “Yo.”

“Do I have the pleasure of speaking to a Miss Ryuko Matoi?”

“Eh?”

The man on the phone had a pleasant voice, and sounded like he was in on years. She pulled away from the receiver and squinted suspiciously. "Yeah, it's me. Who's this?"

"My apologies for not immediately introducing myself. I am Mitsuzo Soroi, personal assistant to the frontrunner of Akechi Incident, Satsuki Kiryuin."

Maybe the look on her face registered, because Mako, Senketsu and Tsumugu all turned to her at once.

"What is it?" Tsumugu mouthed at her. "Who is it?"

"Are you shitting me."

"No, ma'am, I assure you I am not jesting in the slightest."

"Holy fucking shit."

"Ma'am?"

Everything felt very far away, as if she were about to pass out. Faintly, she could see all three of them very agitatedly miming and mouthing words, but she swallowed thickly and ignored them. “What’s with the call?”

“If my intel is correct, you and your band are currently living in a hotel in Seattle, correct?”

“Er, yeah?”

“Ah, sorry. Forgive our intrusion. We like to keep tabs on your social media presence.”

“Huh? Oh, right, the Twitter thing.” Mentally, she shook herself. “Wait, who-”

“Our bassist is a fan of your music and regularly checks your websites. A question: will you be available this night?”

“What?”

“Forgive the short notice, but the band opening for our show tonight are stranded in Tokyo on short notice. There’s no way they’ll arrive on time, and our bassist heard you were in the general area."

Sweat beaded on the back of her neck. "What are you saying?"

"We coordially invite you- no, ask you to open for our show tonight."

"I-"

The other three watched with genuine concern as she let out a strangled noise. Senketsu made to stand from the couch, the only one if the four brave enough to sit on it, and Mako leapt off her seat.

"Ryuko, are you okay?!?"

"Guys, I'm fine." She looked up, face pale. "Hold for a moment, I gotta consult my band members."

"That's fine. Take all the time you nee-"

She slapped a hand over the mouthpiece, took a deep breath, and screamed. It was a single prolonged sound, and they all stared at her like she’d gone mad.

"What happened??"

Even Tsumugu looked worried, even though she knew he'd deny it if she asked. "How badly do you want a gig?"

Hesitation and excitement lit up in his eyes, but his voice was wary. "What do you mean?"

His eyebrows furrowed together the more she grinned. "How do you feel like opening for the corporate scumbags?"

Ryuko had never seen his eyes widen that quickly.

"Wait- no fucking way."

"Yes fucking way. I'm on the phone with the personal assistant of miss eyebrows herself."

"Holy shit."

"Hold up, I got him on the line." She removed her hand and put the phone back to her ear. "So what are we talking here?"

"You will receive the same fee that our first choice would have received. Lodging, meals, and unlimited bar access on us. Any merchandise sales profits of your own are yours to keep. If we like your work, we'll talk about keeping your band on tour. Does that sound like a fair deal?"

"What was the fee?"

They stared at her face, so white they thought she'd topple over. "Please hold on one minute."

Mako looked at Ryuko's knuckles, bloodless from gripping her phone. "Ryuko?"

"Guys," she whispered, "we're never eating McDonalds again."

"What're they paying us?" Even through the gruffness in Tsumugu's voice, the tension was palpable. "I'm not going to get ripped off-"

He fell silent as she pulled up her notepad and typed a number in. Wordlessly, she turned the phone towards him. Even in the dim lighting, the way his pupils immediately dilated spoke volumes.

"Holy shit," he breathed through his mouth.

"Free hotel. Free room service. Open bar."

His mouth gaped before shuddering, as if shaking himself free from the cobwebs in his mind. "I'm not opening for fucking Akechi Incident. No way."

"One gig. They offered to let us tour with them. We'll play tonight and then we can go back to indie punk hell, if you want."

"Consumerism-"

"Tequila, Tsumugu. We can play *smashed* if we want to."

"And free food!" Mako's eyes were like saucers. "I'm gonna meet Satsuki. Oh my god."

“I-”

“Fresh food, Tsumugu. Car repairs. Clean hotels. Think about it.”

“Well-”

The two girls looked at him with puppy eyes. He winced, and turned away before responding.

“No.”

Mako deflated, but Ryuko shrugged. “Good thing you’re not in charge, then,” and held the phone back to her face.

“Wha-”

She ignored Tsumugu’s frantic gesturing and grinned into the mouthpiece.

“We’d love to be there.”

The rest of the phone call Ryuko spent avoiding his gaze and jotting down information on the hotel notepad. The moment she pressed the end call button, he was yelling.

“Why the *fuck*-”

“We go onstage in six hours. You can yell at me later, but Mako and I are going out to get some new clothes. I’m not going onstage like this.”

Tsumugu barely spared her a glance as she gestured at her ratty sneakers. “You know how strongly I feel about this, Matoi.”

“Tsumugu, I hate to be the one who points this out, but you were the one who said we’d take the next gig, no matter what it was.”

Senketsu’s voice was even, but his baritone held a warning.

Do not mess with Ryuko.

The older man ran a hand through his mohawk one more time and let out the deepest sigh he had yet that afternoon. “Fine. We’ll open for them, sell some merch, use this as an opportunity to boost our sales. Then we get roaring drunk on their tab and quit. And that’s it.”

“I knew you’d come around.”

“Just because I have to go along with this doesn’t mean I like it.” His fingers scratched absently at his face, stubbly from the lack of sharp razors. “Doesn’t this feel fishy? How did

they even know we were here?"

She shrugged, already beginning to stand from her chair. "Their bassist's a fan, apparently."

"Sanageyama? His reputation far precedes him."

"He's got a bad rep? I avoid tabloids at all costs."

A bright voice cut in. "Yeah. He's a hot mess."

Mako flipped the laptop she'd been on around to face her. Pictures of him covered the screen, but there were no elegant red carpet photos. Blurry, vague, dark photos of a stumbling man in alleyways, crawling into limos, bleeding from the nose- each one was worse than the first. She winced.

"He's got a revolving door of famous girlfriends and a near constant cloud of groupies around him and has more drugs in him at any given point than your average pharmacy. He's bad news." The derision in Tsumugu's voice was obvious. "Can't believe he got us a gig. He's a disaster."

"But he's got good taste." She stood up abruptly. "Hot mess or not, we're all gonna be drunk by the end of the night, and hopefully a good deal richer."

Chapter End Notes

Long in the works, chapter one of many: the band au I've been writing for several months now. My tumblr is satsukichan, as usual!

hot mess

Chapter Summary

You were a problem child
Been grounded your whole life
So now you're running wild
Playing with them good girls
Naw that ain't your style

You think you're hot shit
and ooh, I love it, I love it, I love it

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A gaggle of young adults all huddled together in a white van, crookedly stationed in the parking lot of a cheap motel. Their faces were lit with the backlight of the laptop the man with spectacles held in his lap. The blue-white light washed out his face, but even in the darkness, the unnatural shade of his hair showed. They stared at the text onscreen for a long moment, before a woman with long, dark hair spoke.

“Are you sure he’s in here?”

“Positive. I realized the trackers in his shoes were mildly ineffective, since he keeps losing them over the course of the night, so I planted a small adhesive patch on the back of his neck. As long as he hasn’t found it and taken it off, it’s accurate.”

The bespectacled man replied quietly, tapping away at his keyboard. A much smaller woman leaned past him and squinted at the screen.

“This is disgusting. I can’t believe we’ve had to resort to this.”

“Easy, Jakuzure.” The largest man of the group was hunched over in his attempts to see the monitor. “Our priority is his continued safety.”

“Who gives two fucks about his good health? It isn’t New Years. We’re going to miss our fucking flight.”

“What if we need to take him to the hospital again?”

“As long as he’s not visibly dying, I think we can let the STI testing wait until Seattle.

The fifth figure didn't speak until now, blonde locks falling over his shoulders. He'd been too busy sipping his coffee and balancing the drink holder in his lap. The other four took their drinks from him without a word, and silently, he handed a second coffee to Ira, keeping a firm grip on the sixth cup. They would need it, if their suspicions were correct (and they usually were). Caffeine usually helped, but he had stronger stuff in case they needed to pull out the big guns.

"Alright," he muttered, putting his spare hand on the door."Are we all ready?"

"As ready as you can be, in a situation like this," Houka replied, snapping the front of his computer down smartly. "Gentlemen first, as always."

"It's usually the other way around-"

"You really wanna run the risk of permanent blindness? The ladies second rule has probably kept you from a lot of suffering and scarring that keeps us guys awake at night. You don't wanna know what we've seen."

The pink haired girl scoffed. "It doesn't even always work. I've seen plenty, and there isn't much to look at."

"I'll make sure to save that line for the next time I need to shut him down."

"Alright, really, no more dawdling," Shiro snapped. "We have a flight to catch, and god knows what state he's in this time. I've got the clothes. Ira, you pack his bags?"

"Threw out all the contraband too."

"I'll go over it one more time, just in case he's getting more creative with his hiding spots." He grabbed ahold of the door handle. "Remember, all at once. Disorient him, grab him, and we're out."

"Roger that."

The woman with the hair sweeping down, far past her waist, pulled an elastic from her wrist, and with one swift motion, pulled her hair into a ponytail. "Let's go."

Shiro pulled the door back, and the light of midday burned into their eyes. The five stumbled out of the van, recovered, and charged, all in the span of a few seconds. The motel room's locks were no match for Ira's momentum, and the wood splintered and hinges creaked in protest. The door resisted for a moment before it came crashing down, and the scene unfolded before their eyes.

Houka was no stranger to Uzu's debauchery. It was as familiar to him at this point as the glow of his laptop, if a lot less welcome, so what he saw was not a surprise. However, it was a good thing they'd decided to leave Satsuki and Nonon to the rear, because disgust bloomed in his stomach. He didn't want to see this. He didn't deserve to have to see this. They definitely didn't deserve to have to see this.

In a single, practiced notion, he and Shiro threw their arms up to shield the view from the ladies, taking up the rear, as they came in through the doorway. Satsuki merely sighed.

“Again?”

The girl on her knees had to redo her roots. It was a miracle he could even tell, though, with the hand clenched in her hair. Her hollowed cheeks, a groan he knew could only be one of pleasure, the stench of alcohol and pot and bile permeating the room- familiar. The traces of the chalky white powder he recognized so well still on his upper lip, collecting sweat in the way he knew meant he was about to come- also familiar. The other figures collapsed on the bed were in various states of undress-mostly women, from all the bare breasts he could see, but there was at least one guy there, vomit still at the corner of his mouth. His nose scrunched up in distaste.

“SA-NA-GE-YA-MA.”

Ira, for all his good traits, was not very sympathetic to the ejaculatory needs of others. Uzu looked up in abject terror, eyes widening as the veritable giant crossed the trashed room in about two strides. The girl had no time to pull away before his hands were on her head, and she came off of Uzu’s crotch with a very distinct, if quiet, *pop.*

Besides him, he could hear his boyfriend groan quietly. He averted his eyes from Uzu’s erection, but the man himself didn’t, staring down at himself before looking up, betrayal shining through the various levels of… whatever the fuck he was on, this time.

“Bruuuuh. Duuuude. Ira. My Bro. Broski.”

Ira stared at him with so much contempt it was physically palpable. “Sanageyama.”

“Way to blue ball a guy.”

The slurring was obvious, as was the way he stumbled forward. He was too used to seeing his eyes glazed over to react anymore.

Uzu stumbled into Ira’s shoulder, groaning. The look of complete disgust he gave him in return was almost worth the growing ache in his arm as he held it in front of Satsuki’s face. With zero consideration for the eardrums of anyone with in twenty miles, the tallest man in the room took a deep breath.

Houka had the choice of shielding Satsuki’s view or protecting the sanctity of his hearing. “Satsuki, I’d recommend you plug your ears. Oh, and close your eyes.”

Unfortunately, he wasn’t quite fast enough. His fingers were only skimming the sides of his ears before Ira let out a bellow that would put a foghorn to shame. Immediately, he knew his head would be ringing for a few hours.

“EVERYONE GET OUT. *NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOW!*”

The semi conscious, writhing mass of semi clothed groupies collapsed on the stained mattress and floor started all at once. The girl he’d pulled away from Uzu was the first to react, not

even bothering to take the time to wipe her mouth before she scrambled to her feet and bolted. The others were not so lucky- Ira grabbed two by the arms and one by the hair and began dragging them. Witnesses to this got the idea and scrambled up, still shaking. The same glassy look was in all of their eyes. Something almost akin to pity took hold in his stomach. Sanageyama's groupies were a confusing bunch, but he doubted they were as far gone as the man himself, still leaning against Ira, slack-jawed and vacant eyed.

They stepped aside to let the semi incapacitated crowd out of the motel room, leaving space for the stragglers to crawl out, before Shiro closed the door behind them, leaving them alone. There was silence as the mostly naked Uzu stumbled back, and opened his arms up for a hug.

"How're ya doi-"

Ira was not having that. His open palm caught his face with a clean snapping noise, and the force knocked him backwards onto the mattress. Houka really wished he'd put some clothes on first so he could drop his arm.

Uzu lay wheezing on the mattress for a few seconds before he was able to push himself back up onto his elbows to look Ira in the eye. "What did I do to deserve tha-"

This time, he switched hands. There was no sympathy to go around, and they stood there silently, watching him clutch his face and moan.

"PUT YOUR *GODDAMN PANTS ON*."

His third attempt at sitting back up was met with a pair of jeans to the face, and he simply fell backwards in resignation. He looked on blankly as Uzu pulled his knees to his face and managed to slide into his pants, stumbling around a bit as he pulled them over his waist and managed to button them. By the time he was able to stop getting his dick stuck in the fly, Houka's shoulder was on fire. Relieved, he and Shiro dropped their arms. Nonon's nose immediately wrinkled.

"Are we ever going to be able to play a show where you don't go on a three day fucking bender? We're gonna miss our flight, you know."

His response to this was to roll over onto his stomach, lean over the side of the bed, and vomit.

"You're disgusting."

He retched weakly, as if in protest, and this time he and Shiro stepped forward. Ira nodded at him.

"Get the shower on."

"Wha-"

Ira grabbed him from under the armpits. He took this as his cue, and ignored Uzu's increasingly loud protests. Ducking into the bathroom, he threw open the shower curtains and turned the water to its coldest setting. He narrowly managed to avoid a kick aimed at his head

as Ira came into the bathroom, taking up all the space. Houka pressed himself against the wall as he dropped Uzu unceremoniously under the ice cold spray. The splashing and screaming sounded like something akin to a murder scene in a shitty horror movie, but his yelling slowed to quiet groans. Ever suffering, Ira sighed deeply before he poured shampoo into his hand and began lathering. The younger man pouted at him, but the effect was lost through the haze of alcohol and the suds sliding down his face. By the time he was clean, Uzu's jeans were plastered to his legs.

Shiro barely spared him a glance as he reached for his garment bags. "Take off your clothes."

"Only pretty girls get to tell me to do that."

"The company you keep in bed says otherwise," Houka snarked under his breath. Grey eyes met green as Uzu looked into his eyes, and grinned. This was made somewhat funnier, as he was currently trying to get out of his pants.

"You're not even out to the public yet. I don't think you get to tell me off about my sexual inclinations. At least I'm open about liking cock."

Shiro shrugged as he handed Ira a towel. "He's got a point, Houka."

"My boyfriend doesn't get to tell me shit. You know how much I love-"

"Shut up," Ira grumbled. "I already know more about your sex lives than I care to. I don't need any more information."

"Whatever."

Uzu wrapped his towel around his waist and shook his hair like a dog, splattering them all with ice cold water. Shiro swore under his breath, and shoved the garment bag at him. "Get dressed. Our plane leaves in an hour."

"Alright, alright, don't get your panties in a twist."

"You ever thought that maybe, just maybe, we're getting really sick of having to track you down?"

"Oh, come on. You know I'll come crawling back eventually." He pulled the towel off his lower half and began towel drying his hair sloppily, much to Houka's annoyance.

"Yeah, but we have a show tonight. We can't afford to leave your drunk ass in LA this time." To his credit, his eyes trailed down his torso and stopped right under his navel. "That's new."

He should have taken his wallet. Uzu had the bad habit of getting things done to him while drunk or otherwise under the influence of any mind altering substances, and the tender red flesh right where his public hair started trailing down read boldly, black block letters achieving a new low for him.

"Choking hazard? Really? Are you trying to look like more and more of a douche?"

The man dropped the towel and managed to shrug as he reached for the shirt Shiro was holding out to him. “Might as well warn them in advance. It’s nice to have a warning on your way down.”

“Believe me, that groupie was not in any sort of danger of gagging.”

“Man, fuck off.”

They watched him struggle with his t-shirt until he finally managed to get it on properly, arms fully tattooed. There was a brief moment where the shirt almost caught on one of his snakebites, but then he was in the clear and still grinning like a moron.

“You know, you’re supposed to put your pants on first, right?” Shiro gestured at the fresh pair of jeans he’d been trying to hand him. “Don’t forget your boxers.”

“Pants on, pants off- you guys don’t know when to give me a fucking break.” He snatched the boxers from Shiro sulkily and pouted. “I can dress myself, you know.”

“You’re still drunk. Maybe high. And the last time we let you take care of yourself, you climbed out the bathroom window, disappeared for the weekend, and we had to get your stomach pumped. No thanks.” He pushed his glasses further up his nose and let Uzu lean against him as he tried getting into his underwear.

“That was like, once.” He stepped into his pants with more coordination than the had the first time, and bounced once or twice to get them over his ass and hips.

Ira silently handed Uzu his coffee. He pulled the top off and downed it in one go, a few drops spilling past his chin. The man swayed, threw an arm over Houka’s shoulder, and grinned, the coffee barely masking the smell of tequila and weed.

“Ira, hand me the listerine. Shiro, the eyedrops.”

“Wait, what-”

He unceremoniously poured the shot of mouthwash into Uzu’s mouth and clamped his hand over his mouth. “Swish around, do not swallow.”

Uzu pulled his hand away from his mouth roughly. There were a few moments of gargling before he spat into this sink. “Can’t say I’m used to people telling me to spit instead.”

“Don’t be disgusting. Can you do the eyedrops yourself, or-”

“I’ve been putting eyedrops in since I was in high school. I could do this shit in my sleep, so stop babying me.”

“Stop acting like an overgrown child, then. We need to get you past security. Can you do that?”

“Can I sleep?”

“Maybe, if you stay quiet.”

“Good,” he grumbled, holding his eyelid open with a finger. “I need to crash.”

In the trashed remains of the motel room, an elderly man set to cleaning up the mess left behind. He worked silently, his forehead not even furrowing as he silently set himself to the task of trying to make the place look less like an orgy had taken place (not impossible) or half a dozen people had gotten wasted and indulged in illegal activities (almost definitely). Carefully, he dusted the remains of a few crushed pills off the nightstand into a small plastic bag, taking care to not get a single particle of dust on his white gloves.

In the midst of the wreck, stood two women, carefully sidestepping puddles of vomit. The taller of the two took a long drink from a bottle of water and sighed deeply.

“At least this time, there’s no property damage, so we should be okay as far as avoiding any rumors,” muttered Satsuki. “How’re the decoys?”

“Ask the nerd, whenever he stops being busy taking care of mister walking public relations disaster. I’m not the one keeping tabs.” Nonon took one good look at her nails and frowned. “Why do you keep him around?”

“Sanageyama?”

“Yeah. There are other good bassists in the world, y’know. Ones with less emotional baggage, and less proclivity to run off and make best friends with a bottle of jack, and a toilet, in that order.”

Satsuki fiddled around with the water bottle’s cap without meeting her eyes. “If I were more good natured, I’d say he was a charity case. Truthfully, my mother loves him. He sells magazine covers, and notoriety sells albums.”

“That’s not the whole story, is it?”

“What makes you think that?”

She opened her mouth, but then shut it again. It would do no good to dredge up the past, especially after it’d been so long. “Nothing. Forget I said anything.”

Satsuki’s mouth opened as if to protest, but in that minute the bathroom door opened again, and four men stumbled out, said PR disaster draped over their shoulders. Uzu looked up to grin at them, wink, and mumble.

“Let’s rock and roll,” he managed, before going limp.

Everyone groaned.

It only took one pit stop in the airport bathroom to dispose of the molly Uzu'd hidden in the soles of his sneakers, and they touched down without incident. It wasn't until they were turning their phones on again did true disaster strike.

"Shit."

The other five looked up in surprise to see Houka already typing a rapid response on his phone, thumbs blurring from sheer speed. "We've got a problem."

Nonon was the first to snark back. "We know. We picked him up this morning."

"Hey-"

Unusually for him, he didn't bother with a clever response. "No, really. There was a freak storm in Tokyo."

Uzu shrugged and popped another airline pretzel into his mouth. "So what?"

"So what is that our opening band is in Tokyo right now, and their plane was supposed to come in half an hour before us, and they are still in Tokyo. If you can put two and two together in the state that you're in, you might just see how that could be somewhat inconvenient for us."

"I'm sober, just tired, jeez. And I'm not the biggest fan of Purity, honestly. What's the problem? We can always get another band to open for us?"

"The venue opens at 8. It's 1:30. Who the hell are we going to find free on a Friday night in Seattle that can match Purity's fanbase?"

They all went silent, with the exception of Uzu, who grabbed ahold of Houka's laptop, to his very loud protests.

"GIVE THAT BACK-"

The taller man held it out of his reach, grinning like an idiot. "I'm just gonna borrow this for a moment."

"NO YOU ARE *NOT. IRA.*"

The hulking blonde man merely nodded and reached out to grab the laptop that Uzu had climbed onto his chair to put out of Houka's reach. Perhaps Houka took another look at Ira's massive hands, because he screeched, "WAIT-" just as Uzu lost his footing trying to back up further on the seat. In a last ditch desperate attempt, Houka grabbed a fistful of shirt , but he was lighter and momentum was something that he didn't calculate correctly, frantic as he

was. Ira nearly collapsed onto Satsuki's lap in his haste to grab Uzu before he fell, but the airplane gave another jolt as it taxied down the runway.

Three fully grown men went down screaming, the laptop still firmly gripped in Uzu's hands. Shiro rolled his eyes and pulled it away from him before the other two crushed him with their combined weight. Groaning, they detangled their limbs, faces red and limbs almost as bruised as their pride.

"I'll look up whatever you want me to check. What did you so desperately need to know that you'd touch Houka's laptop, of all people? What about your phone?" His voice was sharp, but not as cold as it could have been, rather, the exasperation showed. His caffeine shake was especially bad today, and the concealer hiding the bags under his eyes was starting to smudge. The day was taking its toll. "Well?"

Uzu grinned sheepishly in the way they recognized as a weak apology, and Nonon's eyes almost rolled out of her skull.

"You lost it, didn't you."

Her words were rebuking, not questioning. Houka sighed and pulled the laptop out of Shiro's hands gently, rubbing the casing almost lovingly before he went back to typing away furiously.

"Lost is a harsh word, I'd prefer misplaced-"

"I'll arrange to have a new one brought to the hotel, and I'm destroying any information you might have accidentally left on it as I speak. You have to stop doing this."

"Sorry," he muttered, sliding back into his seat. "I fuck up a lot."

Nobody dared agree with him. Ira rubbed the knot of muscle between his eyes where premature wrinkles were sure to form.

"What're we doing about the opening band?"

"That's what I was trying to fix," Uzu muttered sulkily.

"Almost breaking my laptop wasn't the way to go about that," Houka snapped, fingers barely slowing their assault on his keyboard. "So do you have any actual suggestions, or are you just going to keep being a fucking inconvenience?"

"Why don't we just book Freshbloods?"

There was a beat as the bickering reached a screeching halt. Out of all of them, it was Nonon who spoke first.

"Who the fuck are the Freshbloods?"

For the first time in a very long time, everyone looked at Uzu, hoping for a reasonable explanation. This wasn't lost on him, and the smugness of his grin was sickening.

“They were a Portland based band until a while ago, but now they’re traveling, sort of. They kinda got stuck in Seattle after their funds started running low, and they play small time gigs here and there.” He waved his hand airily as he spoke, and Nonon’s glare could have pierced reinforced steel.

“How do you know this?”

“I follow them on Twitter, and Instagram. Oh, and their bassist has a Tumblr.”

“And? Why do we care about small fry?”

“Because, little lady, they kick ass.”

“Thought I told you to fucking *stop calling me that.*”

He ignored her completely. As she stepped forward to say something, Satsuki put a hand on her arm to pull her back, and Nonon satisfied herself with sticking her tongue out at the back of his head.

“They actually have a pretty big online following, but that’s where the problems lie- their lead singer and guitarist tends to get into a lot of arguments online. They sound great, but they’re rambunctious at best, and I’m pretty sure they got the boot from their regular gig for getting into a fight with Hakodate online. Turns out their-”

Shiro cut him off. “Wait, Hakodate? Omiko Hakodate?”

“Yes, the blonde sellout brainless bit-”

“Watch your mouth, Sanageyama.”

Satsuki had chosen to stay quiet as they all argued, but the conversation ran into a screeching halt the moment she chose to speak. “Even if you dislike her music, there’s no reason to use any sort of gendered slurs against her. You’re better than that.”

His face reddenned slightly. Satsuki’s tone was that of a kindergarten teacher calmly explaining to a particularly stubborn kid that paste was not meant to be eaten, nor building blocks be thrown. “Sorry. She’s an old ex of mine.”

“You dated Omiko?” Nonon’s air of disbelief was palpable. “Pop sensation sell out or not, she’s way too good for you.”

“Looooooooong time ago. We were in a band when we were teenagers, before I met you guys.”

“A band?”

“She did vocals. Not bad at that, at least.” He paused for a moment before he kept speaking. “She was rubbish in the sack, though.”

“Gross, shut up, stop talking,” Nonon folded the complementary pillow over her head and hummed for dramatic effect.

“S’not my fault I’m irresistable.”

The derisive snorts from the rest were more of an answer than he deserved, maybe, but otherwise, they ignored him.

The clacking of the laptop slowed. “I found their Bandcamp.”

“Play their latest single. I’m telling you, they’ve got what it takes to be big, like, really big. And they’re available, and we need someone to play. It’s fate or something.”

The seatbelt lights went dim just as his finger hovered over the left click of his mouse. “Shit. We’re disembarking. We’ll play it in the taxi on the way to the hotel, alright?”

“Whatever. But like, trust me on this. They’re just what we need.”

The question mark in Nonon’s question was almost visible. *“Need?”*

For once, the self-congratulatory smile on his face slid off. “You know of our rep, right? We’re vanilla. Boring. We’re safe, fun, uninteresting. I’m the most punk rock person here.”

Nobody was disagreeing, although personally, Satsuki thought that ‘punk rock’ was not the word she’d use to describe Uzu’s behavior.

“You’re not wrong. But why them?”

“They’re fresh. We need some new blood. They’re the Freshbloods.”

Houka’s eyes looked like they were about to roll out of his skull, but unlike Nonon, his reaction stopped there.

“That was the worst attempt at a pun I’ve ever had the misery of listening to,” Nonon snapped, unbuckling her seatbelt. “Even you could have done so much better than that.”

“Yeah? Like to see you try, Smurfette.”

“You wanna fucking go?”

“Name the time and place.”

“Why bother? You’ll forget to show up and then probably puke on the floor.”

“Will not-”

She’d always thought they’d bickered like an old married couple, and now was no different. Even as Ira yelled at them to shut up, she wondered if perhaps…

The thought made her smile quietly to herself. It was about time Nonon moved on, anyway.

The phone made a small click as the elderly man hung up.

“Everything has been arranged, lady Satsuki.”

“Please, Soroi, don’t call me that anymore. I was a teenager with a power complex.”

“You’ll always be my lady, lady Satsuki.”

Soroi let out a small laugh under his breath. “You’ll be meeting miss Matoi and her band members at six-thirty.”

“We’ll be there at seven. I can guarantee that they’ll be late.”

“As you wish.”

She tapped her nails very lightly against the side of the porcelain teacup she held in her hands. “Houka, Shiro. What have you turned up about Matoi and the others?”

Shiro was leaning over their boyfriend’s shoulder to read the screen. “A lot, actually.”

“Matoi’s band came together about a year ago, after she met their second guitarist and she and their drummer moved out and started living out of their van, according to their blog. Their bassist is an android, apparently. Their drummer-”

“Drummer?”

A hulking blonde mass had been sitting in the back of the room, carefully refolding his clothes as he took them out of his suitcase, but he paused halfway through buttoning up his tent sized polo to look up. “Who’s their drummer?”

“You’re interested?”

There was a grin hidden in Houka’s voice, but Ira ignored it. “They’re excellent. I’d like to talk to them further about how they get that sort of intensity in their work.”

“Want me to tell you their name?”

“If you please.”

There were a few seconds of clicking and a pause before he spoke. “Mako Mankanshoku.”

“Right.” The giant stood, head brushing the low ceiling of the hotel room. “I look forward to meeting him. I’m going to start loading my drum kit, so I’ll see you all downstairs. Inumuta, Iori, are your things packed?”

“Yes, actually, about that,” Houka coughed and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose delicately. “Shiro and I have to go do something important before the show, so we’ll be taking a taxi separately. We’ll see you later.”

He shrugged. “That’s fine with me. Good luck with your errand.” His gaze shifted just in time to miss the smirk the two men gave each other. “I’ll see you all downstairs. Have either of you seen Jakuzure or Sanageyama?”

“I hope she’s keeping him out of trouble,” Satsuki said mildly. “It would be inconvenient if he disappeared again.”

“With his track record, maybe we should hope she isn’t keeping him out of trouble,” muttered Shiro.

Satsuki ignored him. “They’ll turn up soon. I wouldn’t worry, Ira. Go make sure everything’s alright downstairs.”

Ira wasn’t five seconds out the door before Houka stopped typing and chuckled under his breath.

“Oops. Turns out their drummer’s a girl.”

“He’ll figure it out eventually,” Satsuki murmured over her tea. “Soroi, could I have a second cup?”

“Certainly, m-”

“Soroi.”

“Ahem. Satsuki.”

“Right.” Shiro slid his chair back against the carpet. “Satsuki, we have a cab to catch.”

“Oh, right. Good luck with your errand.”

“See you in a bit.” The two men slipped out, sharing grins behind her back.

The sound of ceramic clinking echoed in the room as she set her cup down. “Soroi.”

“Yes, m- Satsuki?”

“I have the feeling something big is starting tonight. Something intense.”

“Good or bad?”

“Nothing that will derail my plans, but I have a feeling about this Matoi.”

“Be that as it may, let’s focus on getting through tonight. Should I go look for mister Sanageyama?”

“That’s fine, don’t concern yourself.” She leaned deeper into her chair and sighed. Just as she closed her eyes, however, the phone rang sharply. The ring echoed in the room for a moment before she nodded quietly.

There was a brief pause before Soroi picked up mid ring.

“Hello, you’ve reached the office of Mis- oh, my apologies, ma’am. I’ll hand the phone over right away.” He covered the speaker with his hand and whispered in her direction.

“It’s your mother, Satsuki.”

When her eyes opened again, they were noticeably narrower. “Hand me the phone.”

The receiver was cool to the touch, except for where Soroi’s body heat had warmed it up, and she squeezed it like a lifeline, even as her voice stayed glacial.

“It’s nice to speak to you, mother. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“You’re making plans without me, aren’t you, Satsuki?”

“I beg your pardon, mother?”

“I had Purity all booked for you, and instead you go for some low class rabble? I’m wounded.”

She wondered, briefly, if her mother could hear the way her jaw clenched.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures. We will be fine. This will draw some scruple, no doubt, but you did say that n-”

“No press is bad press. That’s right.” Satsuki could hear her mother idly twirling the phone cord around her finger, as she was prone to do. “Well, do as you see fit. Remember, you’re booked solid for interviews and photoshoots this week, so drink a lot of water- wouldn’t do to have a breakout all of the sudden. And also, what’s with Sanageyama?”

“What about him?”

“Rumor was he was shacking up in some motel with a bunch of his groupies. Was that true?”

How the hell did she know that? “We extracted him, so-”

“Why?”

The sudden tonal shift in her mother’s voice startled her. “What do you mean, why? It could have been a PR disaster-”

“Watch your tone, Satsuki.”

She faltered.

“It’s been almost six months since the last time TMZ did a segment on him, for crying out loud. How is he going to maintain his bad boy image this way?”

“Mother, that’s not healthy, you can’t enable him like this-”

“No press is bad press, how many times have I told you?”

“I-”

“Don’t argue with me, Satsuki dearest. You’re shooting your new music video for Linebacker with him in two weeks.”

“That’s just going to add fuel to the rumors.”

“Let them think what they want. The more people argue, the more views we get on YouTube. I said I’d make you and Nui stars. And I’ve done my part. Now you do yours.”

“Mother-”

The line went dead. Unnoticed by anyone but her, she groaned under her breath and rubbed at the bridge of her nose.

“Satsuki?”

Soroi’s tone of concern was blatantly obvious, without her even having to look up. Faintly, she smiled, and reached for the dregs of her tea.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Another cup?”

“You know me well.”

“Hey.”

He was leaning over the railing of the balcony, something lit in his hand. For a moment, she wondered if he’d managed to sneak something onto the plane, or if he’d already gotten ahold of a dealer, when he tilted his face towards her and a lit cigarette gleamed back at her. A smile tugged at her lips before she could stop herself.

“You know what they say. Hay is for horses, and unless you’re looking into a mirror, I don’t see any around here.”

“If you’re going to refer to me as an animal, I think I prefer monkey. At least I’m used to that one.”

She couldn't lean forward like he could, but she could lean back, elbows propping her body away from the railing. It was the only way to save face, or at least keep him from another comment about her height. Below them, the beginnings of the evening rush hour sounded, cars and exhaust and the noise of humanity starting to gather. It was a big city. They'd be playing a sold out show in only a few hours, but for the moment, she closed her eyes and listened to the sound of the city, and imagined it was the crowd cheering for them.

"Oi, monkey. Share the cancer sticks, will ya?"

There was no need to look up to know what his reaction would be.

"Buy your own fucking cigarettes."

In a practiced motion, she reached up to take the Camel he handed to her anyway. "Light?"

He was rolling his eyes, but she could tell he was smiling. She reached back to press the lit end of his cigarette against hers, like a kiss, until the end of hers burned, paper crackling, and she brought it to her lips to take a drag.

"Aren't they waiting for us?"

She shrugged halfheartedly. "Ira worries too much. We'll make it with time to spare. I just wanna have a smoke in peace without any of them breathing down my neck about how unhealthy it is, as if I didn't know."

"Nobody ever tells me to quit," he muttered ruefully. "I guess they don't think it'd make a difference?"

She watched the tip glow bright before fading into the flat grey ash as he inhaled the smoke. Uzu looked out her, grinned, and blew smoke out his nostrils. The cigarette between her fingers burned away, and she hastily brought it to her mouth again. "Considering how much you care about your health, I'm not surprised."

"I just like to have fun."

The light fell across them and gleamed across the sliding glass window, projecting their shadows across the beds, their neatly smoothed bedspreads crumpling under the weight of their luggage. "Your idea of fun acts out like a commercial for a rehab center."

"I'll be fine. Ira's babysitting me tonight, but I'll find a way to sneak out." There was a brief lull in his speech as he took another drag, but then he turned and smiled at her. "You can come too."

"Not interested in waking up in some cheap motel halfway across the state in a puddle of my own puke, thank you very much."

"We could do other things." His eyebrows waggled like a bad cartoon villain's. Nonon's irritated groan was answer enough.

"Are you propositioning me?"

“Nah, I’m not dumb enough to think I’m in your league.” He flicked the butt off the balcony, and it flew off in a neat arc, burning end lighting up the sky. “I could fall for you, though. You’re definitely mean enough.”

“Fuck off.” There was a laugh bubbling in the back of her throat, though, and it sounded softer than she intended. “You know I like girls.”

“So do I! One thing we have in common already, wow.”

This time, they both laughed. The light of the setting sun caught his profile, and for a moment, he was beautiful. Fire licked up the paper and tobacco in her hand, and burnt the logo off, but before the filter could start burning, his fingers brushed hers as he pulled the butt out of her hand and flicked it over his shoulder.

“Thanks.”

“S’no problem.”

The familiarity of the gesture brought back unwanted memories, although they weren’t necessarily *unpleasant*. A quiet flush crossed her cheeks, but in the ruby light of the dying day, she doubted he’d even notice. Uzu was a particularly observant guy when he wasn’t deep in thought as he was now, fingers rubbing absently at his jaw. His hands always reminded her of that night.

Could he have remembered?

No. There was no way he did. She knew he’d never let her forget it if he hadn’t himself forgotten already, but there was something wistful in the way he looked at her sometimes that made her feel sick to her stomach, almost.

Sick to her stomach was harsh- it was nerves that sent jitters up her spine.

Well, she was better off forgetting it’d ever happened. Teenage nostalgia would do her no good- she’d long let go of anything she might’ve had with Satsuki, just for the sake of her own sanity. An awkward past with one band member was bad enough, but the fact that it had to have been him made it even worse. It’d be best to bury any thoughts of past mistakes, at least for her own mental and emotional health.

Because the unspoken truth about Uzu Sanageyama was that he was a bad, bad boy, trouble through and through. The tabloids had been both kind (playboy, womanizer, stud) and then slightly less so as the drinking got heavier (and, she suspected, so did the drug use). It was a pity- cold as she was and sparing with her praise, he was genuinely talented, a genius, even, with the bass guitar that leaned against her electric violin, neatly packed in her leather case. And past encounters, remembered or not, he was still her friend.

Plus, the free cigarettes were a bonus.

Something small vibrated loudly in her pocket. They both started at once, and she hastily pulled the slim phone out of her jacket. One look at the caller ID, and her face tightened. A

muttered “shit,” slipped free as she swiped her thumb across the screen to bring it to her ear.

“Sorry, Ira, I found him, we’re on our way down-”

“WE ARE GOING TO BE *LATE*-”

Something warm pressed against her shoulder, and she looked up in surprise to see Uzu leaning towards the screen.

“Ira, it was my fault. Yell at me, she had to go looking for me.”

“STOP BEING SUCH A SLACKER AND GET DOWN HERE *RIGHT NOW*, GODDAMNIT.”

“Alright, alright, don’t get your boxers in a wad, jeez.”

“YOU TWO ARE HOLDING US UP. SHIRO AND HOUKA ALREADY WENT UP AHEAD, WE’RE WAITING FOR YOU TWO.”

“The lovebirds just wanna have a cab to themselves, it’s not like they're particularly dedicated to the cause of rock music.”

“JUST GET DOWN HERE BEFORE I-”

He pulled the phone away from his ear, wincing, as Ira’s voice blared from the tinny speakers, shorting them out into a crackle of loud static. The shouting cut off the instant he pressed the end call button, and he handed Nonon her phone back, an apologetic smile already forming on his face.

“Guess we better get down there,” he declared, straightening up. In that brief moment, she remembered how much taller he he really was than her, and she looked up an entire nineteen inches (*“Ridiculous,”* she thought) to see him grin at her.

“Last one in the lobby buys drinks tonight.”

“You shouldn’t drink, anyway-”

He was out the door, case slung over his shoulder, before she could finish speaking.

“Asshole.”

Luckily, he couldn’t see that she was smiling anyway.

“When the fuck are they going to show up?”

Ryuko's case was starting to weigh heavy on her shoulder. "Is this just some really elaborate prank? Because if so, we're kinda massively fucked."

"Maybe you shouldn't have spent our entire remaining budget on new clothes," Tsumugu grumbled.

"Easy for you to say- I've only ever watched you wear that vest and like, a million different black shirts with the sleeves cut off. We have to look good."

An excitable voice chimed in.

"Shopping is fun, too! You should come with us next time!"

"If you need someone to hold your bags, you've got him over there to do it." He jutted his chin out at Senketsu, who was too busy fiddling with his eyepatch to notice the gesture, or the way his jaw hardened. "I'm not one for malls. Enclosed spaces and that much consumerism makes me antsy."

"You don't have to be a dick about it. We're all on edge, alright? We get it."

Tsumugu only grunted in response as she flicked the burning remains of her cigarette away, trying to hide the irritable shake she was starting to develop. She pulled a new one out of the fresh carton with her mouth, and dug around in her pocket for the new lighter she'd bought at the corner store, only to remember who was holding the bag. "Mako?"

Mako was ignoring her, in lieu of letting her feet dangle over the edge of the massive stack of black cases. It might have had something to do with the donuts she was busy eating. "Hmm?"

"Lighter." She extended her hand, and the smaller girl sighed and dropped it down. "Thanks."

"You shouldn't smoke so much, Ryuko," she chided, spilling donut crumbs over her skirt. "It's gross and bad for you and it makes you stink. It's no fun to cuddle with you when you smell like an ashtray."

"At least I shower every day."

His voice was almost wounded when he responded. "I shower daily, what-"

"You don't smell like it. You smell like a crusty, anti-establishment punk asshole in a dive bar bathroom."

"Hey-"

"Look!"

Mako's voice cut through the bickering like a hot knife through butter. All four of them broke off mid sentence to look at the van she was pointing at as it pulled into the parking lot.

There was a moment of dead silence after their driver killed the engine, and then the doors slid open, and a tall woman in four inch heels stepped out, raven hair brushing past her hips

as the wind caught it. After her, a slender girl with pink hair pulled back into a ponytail, tiny in comparison to the first.

If she'd thought that Satsuki was tall, the man who squeezed out after her was massive. Briefly, she wondered how he'd been able to even fit inside before the final occupant stumbled out, and she recognized the messy, neck length seaweed hair from the tabloids Mako had been feeding her all day.

Most of Akechi Incident stood in front of them, and for a moment, the gravity of what was going on hit Ryuko like a bowling ball to the gut. This was it. This was their big break, this was the reason she dropped out of college, this was-

"Ryuko Matoi?"

The speaker was not, as she'd hoped, Satsuki Kiryuin, but Uzu Sanageyama, with a huge grin on his face.

Oh, shit.

"I have a feeling we're going to get along *swimmingly,"* he said, extending his hand.

Senketsu and Tsumugu's quiet groans behind her did not fall on deaf ears, but she stepped forward to shake his hand anyway.

Chapter End Notes

From here on out, we descend into debauchery, a LOT of one night stands with a lot of different, and oftentimes, unexpected, couples, explicit drug use, and the excesses of a rock and roll lifestyle, brought to you by yours truly. My tumblr is satsukichan, same as usual.

partition

Chapter Summary

Private show with the music blasting
He like to call me Peaches when we get this nasty
Red wine drip, talk that trash
Chauffeur eavesdropping trying not to crash

Chapter Notes

I did promise this fic was about to get a lot sexier, so, uh, enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shiro liked to count time in his head. It made sense as an idle pastime, a mental exercise fitting for a boy who had once dreamed of wearing a lab coat, until he found a sewing machine. In particular, he separated his life in phases. His favorite criteria for that, though, was before and after Houka.

They'd known each other since they were fifteen. That was three years after he got over his childhood crush on Satsuki and two after the first time he masturbated, but one before he realized he liked boys too.

It'd been four years since Vancouver, where they'd kissed for the first time. It'd been three and a half since they officially started dating. Under the cover of night, they'd held hands, and later, each other. Shiro had learned a lot about Houka since: his favorite things, his pet peeves, what made him tick. There were a lot of things he liked: boys, scarves, video games, casual soft drug use, hickies, his laptop, blowjobs, Daft Punk. There were a lot of things he didn't like as well- fingerprints on his glasses, people touching his electronics, cigarettes, people interfering in his business, slobs or unpredictable people. Hot messes. Especially, he hated being compared to them, and yet the tween pop magazines still ran with headlines like "Nerd or Bad Boy? Which one is YOUR type?"

His one point of contention, more than anything, was Uzu's debauchery, and in any way being implied to be anywhere in the same league as that walking disaster. Unlike him, he was: a) monogamous, b) subtle, c) incredibly, completely gay. Obviously, part of the subtlety came from hiding his sexuality- to the rest of the world, Houka Inumuta was the quiet, hetereosexual guitarist/jack-of-all-trades musician/handyman. Even if he were out, though, he'd still have preferred to keep his romantic and sexual conquests private. It was simply the

way he was- he prided himself on not being trashy. Or at least, in the public eye. In their bedroom, Shiro had watched him say things that would make the most jaded porn star flush.

So the fact that Houka was desperately trying to undo his tie, with his thigh between his legs, swollen lips pressed roughly against his, erection beginning to press against the front of his pants, all in the backseat of a moving limo, was out of the ordinary, so say the least. Not that he minded seeing Houka all hot and bothered in the slightest. Quite the contrary.

It was something Shiro had wanted to try, and if there was anything that Houka was into, it was experimentation. Houka's breath was hot and sweet, tasting faintly of champagne, and he kissed him fiercely, trying to taste the last few drops of it on his tongue. His weight shifted forward as the car took a sharp turn, and his knee pressed against Shiro. He whined keenly, and then his boyfriend’s fingers were at his perfectly buttoned collar, concealed by the full windsor knot at his throat.

Their clothes were in the way, and he wanted them off, now. Even as he struggled with his own tie, the other man tugged away the trademark scarf he wore wrapped around his neck. Shiro kissed his throat as he revealed more of it- Houka, he'd long known, was incredibly sensitive, the pale skin quivering under his touch. It was a sight he never tired of, and he watched his lover's adam's apple bob as he took a raspy breath, and swallowed, hard. Shiro couldn't help but chuckle.

Almost as if to shut him up, Houka kissed him again, roughly, impatiently. Shiro's laugh bubbled out beneath his mouth, but it faded as his hand wandered south, aimlessly groping, trying to find the front of his perfectly tailored slacks.

"Don't crease them," he gasped when Houka pulled away. "I just ironed th- mmrph..."

Houka was not in the mood for playing around for too long, he guessed, judging from the way his motions betrayed his eagerness. Yet the way he ground the heel of his hand against him where his pants tented up could only be called playful. The smirk on his face said more than anything he could have spoken aloud. Houka let out a loud whine without meaning to when he gripped him through his pants, and any thoughts of rumpled clothes vanished immediately. He was a sight to behold- head thrown back, face reddening, mouth slightly agape, tears collecting at the corner of his eyes.

Shiro was lucky to have such a beautiful boyfriend.

A hand found his arm, right above his elbow, and tugged down. He fell forward, and a leg worked its way between his thighs as he did. Flat against Shiro, he realized exactly what he wanted, and scrambled away. Their momentum had pulled his ponytail free of the elastic he always used to keep the golden hair pulled back. The curls cascaded over his shoulders as he propped himself up on his elbows. Glasses lopsided, mouths red and wet and swollen, they made eye contact.

(Not that he could know, but from Houka’s perspective, Shiro was like some Botticelli angel come to life, almost, except angels wouldn't be so rough when they grabbed his thighs. That was fine. They could both jive with rough.)

Shiro's hand snaked up to grab the bare skin at his hips where his shirt was riding up, and then it was only a matter of leaning forward-

The limo ceiling wasn't particularly interesting besides the personal lights, which he took the chance to dim, while he was laying on his back. As he retracted his arm, Shiro's cool, slender fingers caught his, and brought them to his lips. Houka watched, mesmerized, the way he kissed the palm of his hand, then his wrist, then the inside of his elbow. His lips pressed against his shoulder, and then fluttered at his collarbone, where goosebumps raised at his lightest touch.

"You sure... you wanna... do this... h-here?"

He had to pause between his words because Shiro didn't want to stop kissing his throat. His voice reached him, though, and he pulled away long enough for Houka to see his amber eyes burning gold.

"If you were okay with it, I'd do this anywhere."

Maybe there was some hidden masochist in him. Shiro knew perfectly well just how he was weak to the bedroom eyes he gave him, but still waited for the other man to kiss him as the signal to go ahead before he started pulling up Houka's shirt. For the sake of saving time, he mirrored him. Shiro was ghostly pale underneath the crisp white dress shirt, and Houka’s fingers lingered, sprawled against his chest. He wanted to touch him, Shiro knew, he wanted to kiss him, but for the moment, he forced him to concentrate on not bucking into his touch when experienced hands slid downwards.

Shiro squeezed Houka through his pants and smirked when he leaned against him heavily, blue hair mussing against his sweaty skin.

They had maybe twenty minutes to finish and get reasonably cleaned up- at least he only had to pull his shirt on and make sure he didn't leave any obvious stains. Despite the hassle of having to re-button himself up, Shiro certainly didn’t protest when the final button came undone and he let the cloth slide down over his shoulders.

Shiro hummed into the kiss he gave him, mouths parted, tongues heavy. He breathed against the heat of Houka's mouth, relished the way the other squirmed under his careful touch. Even though he could barely form words, his priorities were obvious in the way he ground against Shiro's thigh.

If this were happening anywhere but the backseat of a goddamn cab, Shiro would have liked to take his time. Teasing Houka was an art- he was impatient, demanding, needy- and there were few things Shiro enjoyed more than watching him go to pieces under his hands. Alas, his watch ticked away their time, so it was with mild regret that he undid his belt.

He wasn't sure if he unzipped his fly or if it undid itself. Either way, Houka's erection popped free almost immediately after Shiro unbuttoned his pants, barely restrained by the navy blue cotton boxers he'd picked out for him. Houka caught sight of Iori's smirk and groaned out loud.

"Hurry up already, fuck,"

"Hmm..." His pale fingers ghosted over his cock, and he groaned in frustration. "You want me to do something about this?"

"Touch me," Houka pleaded "and stop dawdling, we don't have much ti-"

His voice cut off the moment Shiro stroked him deliberately. The way his voice went up an octave was music to him. If music was their day job, making Houka whimper was a night hobby he relished. His fingers dug into the leather upholstery as he tried not to verbalize his pleasure. Shiro merely smiled and pulled him out in full, completely erect and almost throbbing.

"What do you want me to do to this?"

His attempts at being suave were somewhat interrupted by a sharp turn the car took, knocking his hair into his face. Spitting out golden hairs didn't seem sexy, though, so he resisted the urge to do so and instead pulled his hair behind his ear and smiled.

Houka's face looked conflicted between laughing at him or begging him to fuck him. It was endearing, though, so he bent to kiss him quickly, and let his lips trail to his ear.

"Tell me you want me to fuck you, and I'll touch you." His fingertips trailed up to the head of his cock, and rubbed his thumb against him. The whine Houka breathed into his ear made his own pants tighten further, but he stubbornly ignored his own needs to listen to him whisper under his breath.

"T-touch me."

"And?"

"I w-want you to touch me. I want- I want you to fuck me, please touch me, fuck me,"

He lived to serve, he supposed. Slowly, achingly, teasingly slowly, he pulled his fist over Houka's length, listening to his breathing shift. Beneath him, Houka’s heart stuttered eagerly, a staccato sound thudding in his chest. He'd gotten what he'd wanted, already, and now it was time to reward him for his patience.

Shiro kissed his chin, and the space under his jaw where the skin thinned and he could see the blood rushing beneath it, each rapid heartbeat and staggered breath quickening with the movement of his hand. Houka gasped when he pressed his lips against his throat, and then his collarbone, and his sternum, and above his navel.

By the time his lips opened over the head of his cock, Houka was drawing ragged breaths, fingers digging into his scalp. Even if he'd never admit it, he loved having his hair pulled back, and there was a lot to grab. He hadn’t had enough time to really torture Houka, but he’d taken long enough that he didn’t hold back when he liked something Shiro did with his mouth. As his breath quickened, the blonde pulled his pants down further, ignoring the sting of his eyes when they watered, or the pinpricks of pain as hairs pulled free from his scalp. He

cupped his balls in his spare hand, and hoped to every deity he could think of off the top of his head that he still had the bottle of astroglide and a condom in his jacket pocket.

It wasn't too long after Shiro started that he heard Houka grunt and the familiar taste of semen spread in his mouth. At least, his jaw hadn't started aching yet. Perhaps he'd teased him for too long. Either way, it caught him unawares, and a dribble of cum spilled past his lips. Houka looked at him, redfaced and eyes hooded, as he wiped the offending liquid from his mouth and swallowed, albeit with a grimace.

"Sorry about that."

"It's okay, we're short on time anyway." His erection was starting to really make its presence known, but he wasn't about to pay attention to that just yet.

Houka gestured towards the front of his slacks, flesh straining against the pressed cotton. "Really, I can help with that."

"You can help by looking through my jacket." He gestured at the Armani carelessly discarded on the floor by his elbow. "Left pocket. Shit, I hope I brought it."

"I can suck you off if we don't," Houka's grin was almost palpable. "Make up for not warning you."

He barked out a short laugh as Houka rummaged around. "I know I'm good with my mouth, but it's not a race."

"Fuck you."

"I'm trying. Is it there?"

Houka pulled out a small bottle triumphantly. "My ass is yours, Iorin."

"That nickname is stupid. Lay back."

He rolled his eyes, but complied. Shiro squirted enough lube on his fingers to easily coat them, and rubbed the cool liquid to warm it up slightly before he pressed them against his entrance. Houka hissed at the sudden temperature change, but didn't protest otherwise. He rubbed small circles against him until he noticed Houka was half hard again, and slowly pressed a finger into him.

It wasn't long until he added another, but Houka was already at full mast, hand crawling back down to wrap his fingers around himself.

He decided to take this opportunity to scissor his fingers inside him. Houka's hips lifted full off the seat to force his digits in deeper, and he threw his hand out to steady himself against the car door. The hand that'd begun to stroke himself instead went against his face to stifle his moan.

"You're kind of a little slut, Houka." The words were whispered, low and dark and wet against the skin under his ear, and the other man whimpered against his will. "You really like

my fingers in your ass, don't you?"

He watched with something approaching fascination as Houka let out a breathy moan that sounded more like a plea than a yes. Watching his ice cold demeanor melt in a matter of minutes never got old. Years of practice had taught him how to wind him up, and he had this art down to a science.

(Privately, he chuckled to himself. Houka would appreciate his wordplay, but he'd share his sense of humor with his boyfriend after they both got off.)

Instead, he curled a finger into his prostate and had to stop himself from grinning when he felt Houka tighten his grip on him. His body clenched around his fingers, slickened with lube and the leftovers of Houka's last orgasm. This was enough. Any longer and he'd lose it again, and then he wouldn't get a go himself.

Houka's disappointment when he pulled his fingers free was verbal, and he had to press his hand against his mouth to stifle his voice.

"You ready?"

"Hurry up," he whined.

Shiro was careful to roll the condom down properly, and despite his previous talk, he was also careful pushing in. Houka shuddered underneath him.

Blood throbbed where they met, but he was patient. They had just enough time to finish this satisfactorily for the both of them.

He rocked into him, slowly at first, but it was only a few minutes before he was driving himself in, hard and fast. Houka's hands were busy- one bracing himself against the seat where he was being pressed in by his weight on top of him, and the other gripping his arm. Said arm had one hand firmly grasping Houka's ass, tilting his hips into the most comfortable position. The other was wrapped around Houka again, jacking him off with sure strokes. There was no time for gentle caresses or teasing, trailing, feather light touches. At this point, it was a race against time.

His momentum brought him only inches away from Houka’s face, bending him nearly in half. The other boy laughed under his breath, maybe amused by the intense expression of concentration on his face. His breath came out in a few hot puffs of air, tickling his neck, and Shiro couldn’t help but giggle. Their foreheads touched, sweaty, and Houka nipped at his mouth gently.

“You’re so cute, Shiro.”

They kissed briefly, and then they were rutting so furiously neither had breath for anything as luxurious as that. Shiro crossed the finish line first, jerking awkwardly. His steady rhythm was ruined, and his thighs were cramping, but he still managed to pump his way through it, sweat rolling down his face. It was pretty hot in this backseat, now that he had time to notice.

Briefly, he wondered if their chauffeur had heard them, and then decided he didn't care, because they were tipping them handsomely, and because Houka finished then, spilling onto his hand. Exhausted, he wiped his hand clean with a tissue and pulled out, carefully rolling the condom off before he tied it off and crumpled it up with the soiled tissue.

"Clean up. We're almost there."

If there was one thing he should have anticipated, at least as an amateur scientist, it was how much sweat and its imprints on the leather upholstery made it obvious they'd had a quickie. Mentally, he jotted it down, in case they tried this again.

The two dressed hurriedly, as their destination came into view. Houka's shirt was on backwards, and he was almost certain his tie was improperly tied, but he didn't care. They scooped up their equipment and staggered out the door, knees still slightly shaky. It was too late to fix Houka's hair, which was mussed in the way only sex could muss hair. His expression implied that he himself was probably just as bad, if not worse. Nothing they could do about that now, though.

Their driver cast a disapproving eye over them as Houka handed her her fare. "Dropped you guys off backstage, as asked. The back door is by the right."

"Thank you."

They made to leave before her voice stopped them in their tracks. "Speaking of back door, my backseat'd better be fucking pristine. I had to turn up my music to drown you two out."

Shiro could feel himself flushing up until the roots of his hair. "S-sorry."

Houka stepped forward with another few bills in his hand, which she took without looking at. "Learn to be quieter or don't pull that shit in my limo. I'll be here at the assigned time."

She drove off in a cloud of dust, leaving them both speechless.

"Oops."

There was a few seconds of silence before Houka burst out into peals of laughter, shaking so hard that Shiro momentarily feared he'd topple over.

"Let's go already." He turned on his heel, still chuckling to himself, as Shiro desperately tried to fix his hair.

He wiped his runny nose and hoped to god it was snot, not blood. It'd been a while since he even did bumps of anything this strong. Clean and fast, everything was streamlined, almost. He slipped through the world and the throngs of busy roadies, head abuzz. He'd gotten some good shit this time around. And it was wearing off. He hadn't done enough.

God, he could feel himself coming down like a meteor. Fuck, where was it-

He fumbled in his pocket for his rolling papers and crouched over an amp. Years of rolling his own joints had made it so that it was almost second nature at this point. The sweet click of his zippo and the familiar burn in his throat felt like a hug from his mother, were his mother the type that was inclined to hug. Also, if he'd even talked to her for more than five minutes at a time in years. Or seen her in person since before he could legally drink.

He wasn't a particularly good son, but then again, his parents weren't particularly good at parenting either.

Whatever, he was feeling it now. The stench would give him away, but as long as Ira didn't take away his stash, he could deal. He sighed deeply and took another hit.

Shit, alcohol and everything else he'd ever gotten himself fucked up with could come and go, but weed was eternal. He exhaled after a count to ten, a beautiful smoke ring. His only real friend in this world-

"Sanageyama, that'd *BETTER NOT BE WHAT I THINK IT IS*-"

The voice rang out behind him, and panic set in. Time for his emergency backup plan. He shoved the entire joint into his mouth and swallowed without chewing, gagging at the taste.

He was safe-

"I SAW THAT."

"Fuck."

The backstage area was in complete disarray, to nobody's surprise, especially not theirs. There was a commotion going off just out of their line of sight, and Uzu's voice was particularly loud. The duo gave each other exasperated looks before silently agreeing to get to work. Houka bent over to give him a peck on the cheek, a kiss that was incredibly chaste considering he'd just managed to put his shirt back on the right way.

Well, he wasn't complaining. Shiro ran a hand through his hair and groaned. The shouting was getting louder, now, and he wove his way through sound technicians balancing huge speakers to the source, which was, unsurprisingly, Uzu.

"What'd you fuck up this time, Sanageyama?"

Several heads turned his way. Ira was holding a tiny bag over their heads, and immediately, he knew what the issue was. Uzu's eyes met his, and they were already starting to redden, pupils huge and dark.

“How do you get ahold of that shit so soon?” There was borderline admiration in his voice. “We haven’t been in the city for five hours yet.”

He shrugged. “I have my ways.”

“Don’t encourage him, Shiro,” Ira sounded exhausted. “Have you ever considered, you know, showing up to practice sober?”

Uzu groaned. “We’re in Washington. I got that legally, too. Kinda. Not really- give me back my weed.”

“No.”

“Ira, just give it back.”

“But-”

“Better he have the pot than anything else.”

Ira sighed in obvious resignation and dropped the bag back into his outstretched hand. “Go practice.”

Uzu turned to go, but Shiro threw a hand out. “I need to talk to you.”

“Uh-”

“I’ll see the rest of you later,” he said curtly, and turned on his heel sharply, hand gripping Uzu’s forearm tightly.

He half guided, half dragged him away from the others, questions on their faces, worry on Uzu’s. They kept walking until he found a spot where they were unlikely to overheard, and suddenly, dived his hand into his pocket.

“Hey-”

Sometimes, Shiro hated being right about things. A tiny bag of white powder sat in the palm of his hand. Uzu made a grab for it, but his reaction time was slowed, and Shiro was significantly stronger than his 5’6 frame would suggest. Uzu’s muscles were useless behind the haze he was in, and he groaned impatiently.

“You gonna tell me you got this legally, too?”

“How did you-”

“Houka and I have been monitoring your texts from our laptops for a while now. We saw the texts you sent before we wiped your phone. We also saw that you sold it, not lost it.”

“That’s an invasion of privacy-”

“If you can’t act like a mature adult, we’re not going to treat you like one. We’re a team, Uzu.”

“I am an adult-”

“Just because you get laid twice a day doesn’t mean you’ve mentally progressed past sixteen. You’ve been pushing it, lately. We’re not going to stand for this. *I’m* not going to stand for this.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, suddenly feeling the weight of a long, long day. “It’s fucking ridiculous, the lengths we have to go to, just to keep you relatively in check. Every time you disappear, Houka and I are the ones that have to track you down. And now you’re doing coke again? After last time?”

“It’s not like that-”

“Then tell me it’s not coke. Tell me you haven’t already done a line.”

Uzu’s face was more of an admission of guilt than anything else. Shiro groaned internally.

“Okay, maybe a tiny tweak.”

“And?”

“And then I followed it with a joint to take the edge off the crash-”

“Are you *shitting* me.”

“Look, I haven’t done blow in two years, I’ll be fine-”

“Bullshit, Uzu. That’s bullshit and you know it.”

“It was a tiny bit! Tiny!”

“I get you’re supposed to be the ‘trashy rockstar’ or ‘bad boy’ or whatever- however the fuck Kiryuin panders you off as to your legions of teenage bedwarmers-”

“Yo, watch it. I don’t fuck underage girls, Shiro. That’s low.” He pushed his hair out of his eyes and sighed. “Even I’ve got standards.”

Shiro sighed. “Alright, I’m sorry about that one.”

“And you don’t get to call me trashy when I know for a fucking fact you took that limo ride separately so you and geek boy could hook up. Took the long route too, I bet.”

Touche, he thought privately.

“Okay, so I’m not exactly in the running for sainthood. But your self destructive tendencies aren’t just fucking you up, they’re fucking everyone else up. If I told Satsuki or Ira about this-”

“Don’t. Please.” Uzu’s eyes were normally huge, but the way they widened, combined with the dilated pupils, made him look like a kicked puppy. A very stoned puppy, but the analogy still carried. “He’ll never let me out of his sight if you do that. I have things to do. Lots of things. Lots of *people*. Ira’s a good guy, he’s my best friend, but he’s like the anti-viagra. Huge bonerkill. A enormous, hulking chastity belt. Made out of muscle and pent up aggression or sexual frustration, not sure which-”

“All I gotta do is call for him.”

“Please, Shiro, I’m begging you. He’s already practically shadowing me as is, come on-”

“Hmmm…”

“Please. You’ve got a sex life! How much would it suck if you couldn’t get your dick su-”

“*REALLY* tempted-”

“Bro, come on. From one man to another, I swear I’ll stay away from the hard stuff if you let this one slide.”

Shiro faltered momentarily. Uzu’s eyes flickered over him, and for a moment, he thought he’d caught the hesitation in his body language, but instead, he spoke, in a timid voice.

“So I guess I can’t have that back-”

He faltered under the death glare Shiro gave him. “Right. Thought not.”

“Go practice. Next time I tell Ira immediately, and no amount of begging will convince me otherwise.”

“Thanks, dude. I owe you one.”

“I’m not kidding. If there’s another time, I’ll personally make sure Ira kills you.”

Shiro pocketed the tiny bag and made a mental note to dump it in the toilet and flush it with bleach, to be safe. The unease remained even after Uzu sighed and walked off, even when he was gone and out of his line of sight, as it always did whenever someone called him a man.

It’d been growing inside of him. His digestive system was a series of knots each and every time someone said it, from the knot in his throat to the heavy feeling in his stomach. It wasn’t that he liked being called a woman either- his hair had been long since he was in his early teens, and he’d never quite gotten used to the annoyance of people assuming he was a girl, either.

Neither felt right.

And every time, the voice in the back of his head got louder, asked him why he didn’t correct them, but the truth was, he didn’t even know what he would ask them to call him.

Long hair, makeup, check. Dick, check. Boyfriend, check.

Useless, pointless gender markers.

His head was pounding just thinking about it, and it wasn't that he realized his hands were shaking again that he remembered it'd been four hours since his last cup of coffee.

"You're… not the drummer?"

The mohawked man sighed impatiently. "Why does everyone assume I'm the drummer?"

Ira cast an eye over the man in the patched vest. Tattoos covered his forearms, there was a cuff on his ear, his hair was black and red in equal measure, and he looked irritated that he was even here. "My mistake, Mr. Kinagase. But if you're not the drummer-"

Tsumugu jerked a thumb behind his shoulder. "The small one."

He cast an eye over the three figures huddled excitedly by the refreshments table. The tallest figure was a dark, androgynous looking android with deep blue hair tied into a tiny ponytail, holding two plates loaded with hors d'oeuvres and pastries. They looked like they might be a drummer type- the robotic arms would definitely come in hand, but they played the bass, or so Tsumugu had told him. The second tallest was Matoi, who was sipping her drink in one hand, and balancing a loaded plate with the other. He'd recognized her voice, earlier, when he'd listened to their album in the hotel. She had a monroe that caught the light when she turned to laugh at something her friend had said, and red lipstick and an attitude to match, but she played guitar.

That left the small girl with the bleached hair. Her skirt was pink, her sweater had tiny bunnies on it, she had a headband with a big bow on it, and she was scarfing down cupcakes like she was terrified they were going out of existence.

"No way."

"Yep." Tsumugu fidgeted, fingers tapping anxiously against his leg. "That's Mankanshoku. She's tiny, but don't let that throw you off guard. She and Ryuko played metal before I joined their band."

"I, uh, didn't expect that."

"You said you wanted to talk drums, right?" The annoyance was starting to show through his patient facade. The man was clearly uncomfortable surrounded by this many people. "Mako's right there."

"I'm sorry to have taken so much of your time," Ira mumbled, slightly mollified. "Thank you for-"

“One quick tip, though,” Tsumugu interrupted. “You want a straight answer out of her, try to be direct. She’s a good kid, but not very good with metaphors. Or any sort of complex ideas.”

“Er, thanks.”

“No problem.” He fidgeted a little more, tapping his fingers against his pocket until he sighed again. “Uh, listen, do you know where I could go smoke?”

That explained the jitters. “There’s an exit backstage. Don’t lose your pass, or it’ll be hell getting back in, though. Also, Shiro- the short guy with the ponytail? will kill us.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

With Tsumugu hightailing it for a smoke break, there was nothing keeping him from talking to Mako Mankanshoku. Warily, he eyed her. She and Ryuko and the android… Senketsu or something like that- had their faces squished together. The tiny girl stuck her arm out as far away from her head as she could and grinned a million watt grin as she angled the phone to avoid the glare from the spotlights.

“Send instagram some love!” The three broke into broad smiles and flashed peace signs as Mako’s thumb hovered over the shutter. “Say hi to 2 million followers!”

Were they taking… selfies?

Hesitantly, he approached and loudly cleared his throat just as the camera went off. She screamed, and the phone slipped from her grasp. It hung in the air for a long instant before anyone reacted.

There was a moment where everything seemed to slow down as she fumbled for it, and it bounced out of her reach. Ryuko dived for the phone before it hit the ground, but it ricocheted off the palm of her outstretched hand. Even Senketsu made for it, but his fingertips barely grazed it before it was too far away to catch.

It wasn’t until he found himself on a single knee, phone tiny in his hand, that he realized he’d even made a move to catch it. He looked down. The only thing on the screen was a massively blurred image of their faces, caught permanently in a yell.

“Sorry about that-”

He inclined his face up to hand the phone back, but stopped dead in his tracks.

The spotlight caught the fringe of her face and hair as she looked down at him, knees bent, hand outstretched, and her lips parted. Her actual words were lost through the sudden muffler someone put on his hearing. All he could hear was the bustle of the paid local security bustling around the stage, but as if his ears were plugged, and he was underwater, deep down and far away from her voice.

Mako had freckles and huge brown cow eyes and the most genuine smile he’d ever seen, all warmth and bubble. Her outstretched hand was tiny compared to his, but it was surprisingly warm when their fingers bumped together. If she noticed his hesitation in handing her phone

back, she didn't comment on it, instead offering her other hand as if to help him stand. The gesture was sweet, if not completely out of the question- he'd knock her over or pull her down. Instead, he stood up, and suddenly she was craning her head up to maintain eye contact. She was still talking, too.

Well, at least he caught himself- he realized he must have been staring. "Sorry, what was that?"

"I said, 'thank you for catching my phone'!"

"Oh, that." He coughed into his fist. "I just came over here to introduce myself-"

"Did you want to be in our selfie, too?"

"Wh-what?"

"Our selfie!" She beamed up at him, and to his horror, he could feel himself flushing. Maybe he had a fever? "You came over just as we were about to take it, and I thought you'd like to join us!"

"N-no, I just wanted to say hi-"

"Well, would you like to be?"

"Huh? Uh, sure?"

"Just gimme a second to take one with the band, and then we can try and squeeze all of us into one picture!"

She pressed her face flush against her friends', but then paused momentarily. "I'm Mako Mankanshoku, by the way. The drummer."

"I've heard about you, Mako." he said, and it was technically true. "It's a pleasure to meet you, although I apologize for almost breaking your phone in the process. I'm Ira Gamagoori.Uh, I play drums too."

"Nice to meet you, Ira! Gimme a sec, just gotta- Senketsu, smile wider!" She tugged at his cheek. Senketsu rolled his eyes and grinned instead.

"Is this good?"

"Better!" She poked the other girl in the ribs. "Ryuko, stop scowling!"

"Alright, alright."

"Okay! On the count of three, say cheese!"

"Why cheese?"

“Because I happen to like cheese, Ryuko. Anyway, show them your pearly whites! One! Two! Three!”

Now it was Ira that was fidgeting nervously when she turned to him and opened her arms to him. “Can you crouch? I need to get you in the same shot-”

He hadn’t so much as begun to kneel before someone cut him off.

“Gamagoori, you’d better not be fucking around taking photos when you’re supposed to be warming up backstage.”

A very irritable voice interrupted him midstride forward. Ira turned nervously to find Shiro flanked by two terrified assistants, a cup of coffee in one hand, papers under the same arm, and a pen in his spare hand, the cap chewed to pieces.

“Sorry-”

“Don’t sorry me. Go. You can socialize at the afterparty.”

Ira opened his mouth to point out he was going to be stuck looking after Uzu, probably, but sighed in resignation. “I’ll talk to you later, Mako. And, uh, we’ll see about that selfie.”

“Right!”

He waved awkwardly, and it wasn’t until he was halfway to his dressing room that he remembered what he’d meant to ask in the first place.

Shiro thanked any deity he could think of off the top of his head for coffee. He swore under his breath at the roadies in his way as he made his way through the throngs of busy people, weaving through the crowd with the expertise of someone who was used to navigating busy backstage areas, and was getting sick of doing so. The roadies stacking amps on stage parted as he swatted at them with his clipboard between sips of his favorite drink in the world. Shiro didn’t have time for anything, his patience was at an all time low, and people kept getting under his skin. He had an hour or two before the place started filling up, and he was nowhere near done. Hell, he had no idea where anyone was. However, he had to get their opening act set up and ready to go before he could even bring himself to deal with Akechi Incident’s problems.

Ryuko Matoi was much as he’d expected her, except she was ever so slightly shorter than he, so their eye levels were almost exactly the same. That was when she was standing up straight. From what he’d noticed of her, she slouched a lot, much like Uzu, who was noticeably more sober (physically and emotionally) as he tuned his bass. She had blue-black hair, much like Satsuki’s, but jaw length and almost carelessly layered, choppy with the underside and a prominent streak of her bangs a gorgeously well-dyed red. Even Nonon was quietly

impressed by the quality of the dye job, as he'd noticed her checking her roots in a compact after seeing her in person.

Of course, their current physical appearances were only important to him in the sense that he had to scope out what he was fixing. He had a job to do, and was determined to get it done, but he had to admit, Freshbloods was definitely grittier than they were. Tattoos? Check. Rippling muscles, mohawks, terrifying guitarists? (He snuck a peek at Tsumugu Kinagase, who looked like he would murder the first person that approached him with a makeup brush, and reeked of tobacco) Check. Tiny girl with a bleached pixie cut? Check. Weird android in a… was that a seifuku? He had his work cut out for him.

After all, Shiro Iori was a jack of all trades, sound technician, personal stylist, and above all, right hand (man???) of Satsuki's. It was a perk (or side effect) of having been friends for so long, he supposed.

Well, a job was a job was a job was a job. The other band looked at him warily as he approached them.

"Are you gonna try and put makeup on me. I can do foundation, concealer, maybe, but I'm *not* wearing eyeliner."

Tsumugu's voice was less of a threat of violence and more of a promise, so he shook his head silently. "I'm just a stylist. I'm here to figure out what to do with you guys."

"What's wrong with how we are now?" Ryuko gestured at the four of them in confusion. "We're the Freshbloods. This is our look."

Shiro wondered if there was a way to politely tell someone they looked awful without using the exact words.

"I got this outfit today!"

The smallest one of them all was wearing something that looked like she'd gotten it off the Justice sales rack, and he had to force himself not to visibly wince. She twirled, and all he could see was badly sewn magenta polyester ruffles. God, they were a mess. Ryuko was wearing a Nirvana shirt, for fuck's sake.

"We're going to make some small tweaks to your outfits, okay?"

"Huh?"

"Just something minor, no worries." He resolved to burn their clothes immediately afterwards. The coffee and advil were definitely kicking in, though, which kept him from physically screaming at the cheap stitching on the android's skirt. "Look, why don't you all relax in the dressing room, and I'll bring some stuff out?"

"Don't you need our sizes?"

Perhaps his facial expression showed how offended he was at Ryuko's suggestion, because she faltered.

“Or not.”

God, he was not in the mood to deal with these people. Desperately, his eyes scanned the crowded stage until he caught Nonon’s eye. Immediately, she turned around and tried to look busy, but he wasn’t having this today. Glaring daggers into her back, he cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled.

“Nonon, can you come over here?”

Her back muscles tensed- the backless shirt revealed everything. She’d heard him, and turned around as slowly as she could get away with. He could almost hear her sighing.

“Whaddaya want, Shiro?”

“I need you to help miss Matoi and Mankanshoku pick some clothes out. Uh,” he looked at the android, who was busy playing on his phone. “Senketsu, is it?”

“Hm?” He looked up from what he presumed must be an intense 2048 game to look him in the eye. “Yeah?”

“Uh, how would you prefer to get dressed?”

There was a brief moment where something in Senketsu’s eyes softened visibly in recognition of what Shiro was actually asking him, and he found it odd how human they were, for something that was supposed to be mechanical. Odder still, was how he could feel something approaching solidarity with a creature that spat in the face of nature, metal and flesh fused so one could barely be told apart from the other.

The scientist inside him was dying to ask questions he knew would be rude, but the person on Satsuki’s payroll knew that wasn’t an option. “I mean, do you prefer feminine clothing, or masculine?”

“I try to go for an androgynous look, but I’ll take anything you give me, honestly.” He gestured at his skirt. “Really, knock yourselves out.”

“Right. I’ll keep that in mind.” He took one look at his chewed up Bic pen, tossed it over his shoulder, and pulled a clicking pen from his pocket and started scribbling furiously on his clipboard. “Nonon?”

Nonon was pleading with her eyes, but Shiro wasn't having it today.

“I’ll take Senketsu and Tsumugu to help them pick out better outfits. Do you think you can handle Mako and Ryuko?”

“Whatever, *Iorin*,” she muttered.

Luckily for him, nobody noticed the way he choked on his coffee.

Ryuko hoped she wasn't staring, and instead coughed and focused intensely on Mako's hair. She'd managed to trim it back into something resembling a pixie cut, and thought about helping her bleach her roots. Polynomial equations. Her favorite vegetarian lasagna recipe that Tsumugu made whenever he was in a good mood. Desperately, she tried to think of anything besides the girl with the pink hair currently snarking back and forth with the clearly exhausted blonde dude.

Ah, yes, her ever mysteriously disappearing sex drive, more off than on, was back. There it was, popping up as she watched Nonon analyze Mako with a stare that could melt steel. Perfect timing. Just great.

She couldn't have survived sharing a room with Mako Mankanshoku of all people, who always woke up at the drop of a pin when you needed her to stay asleep, since fucking high school otherwise. She'd never had a problem with casual sex to solve any odd instances where she felt any sort of need to take care of her libido spikes, which were few and far inbetween, but it was incredibly rare for anyone to actually make her *feel* anything.

It only ever happened once in a blue moon, but it was always awful when it did. It was frustrating, too- her sexuality had no sort of consideration for time or place or company, and yet there she was in front of her. She'd bet a million bucks she was flushing.

It shouldn't have been as hard as it was to try and explain the concept of not needing sex or relationships in any way 90% of the time, especially to casual partners that got too clingy. Most of the time, though, it was too much of a hassle to explain to the people she was sleeping with that she liked to fuck girls and boys and people who were neither and people who were both- just not most of the time. Sure, she kissed people in bars, but she was fine with the kisses being just that- kisses. And even then, it wasn't like they needed to mean anything- hell, it'd been years since she'd cared about dating. It wasn't like she didn't enjoy the occasional one night stand, but it'd definitely been a while since someone like her came along.

Although all things considered, it wasn't too surprising, seeing as Ryuko had a type. Dyed hair, pierced tongue, bad attitude that she could spot from a mile away, and perfect eyeliner. If she'd had a checklist like the one bubblegum herself was furiously looking at, she'd score a ten out of ten.

Nonon (or flamingo head, as she'd already secretly decided to call her) was gorgeous, and Ryuko wanted her to sit on her face.

God, how inconvenient. She shook her head and forced herself to concentrate on her words.

"-so we'll have some people do some quick touch ups on your faces, and then you can pick something out from the racks, okay?"

"Hold up," Mako raised her hand over her head.

"What is it?" Pink scowled. Ryuko was digging it.

"We're going on first, right?"

"Yeah."

"Just how many people are we performing for, anyway?"

"Somewhere between two and three thousand people, I bet."

"Oh."

Mako's grin fell momentarily, and even Ryuko felt sweat prick at the back of her neck. Then she broke into a huge smile again.

"That's the biggest crowd we've played for, right, Ryuko?"

"Right..."

Mako was right. This was their biggest show, by at least six times their second biggest crowd. She couldn't help but feel faint for a moment.

Well, it wasn't like she'd become a rockstar so she could play small fry crowds. "Trial by fire, I guess," she managed.

"This is nothing," Nonon waved a hand dismissively. "This is a small show, really. But they'll be your sample crowd- they like you, we'll see about keeping you on for the tour."

"One last question!" Mako's hand shot up into the air again, and she sighed exasperatedly.

"What is it?"

"Why do you guys fly from city to city when everyone else in your tour crew drives?"

"Simple." Nonon inspected her nails delicately before she answered. "Satsuki gets carsick incredibly easily."

"Wow."

“Yep.” She scowled at her cuticles one last time before she straightened up to her full height (which, in four inch heels, was still only about Mako’s height) and clapped her hands together. “Right. Let’s get cracking.”

It took all of half an hour to go through the massive racks of clothes that Shiro had left her, and she was frankly uninterested in helping out. So what if she technically had nothing to do before the show? Why did she have to do this?

On one hand, she knew the answer was that Shiro trusted her taste in clothing, which she should be proud of- knowing him since they were five meant she also knew how incredibly picky he was about dressing everyone. On the other, it meant work, and time not spent lazing around her own dressing room, eating skittles.

Not that work didn't come with its, uh, perks too.

"Does this really suit me?"

Ryuko Matoi was tall, dark haired, blue eyed, and doing a very bad job of trying to sneakily drop hints that she was interested. She was also practically modeling the clothes Nonon herself had picked out. The particular red bandeau/crop top hybrid and high waisted shorts combo she'd picked out especially accented her, uh, assets.

"I mean, we can pick something else, I'm just telling you, it gets really hot up there under the spotlights-."

"I like it. Can I wear it with my jacket?"

"The letterman one?"

"It's a sukajan jacket, actually."

"Try it on."

She shrugged into the jacket and threw her arms wide open, grinning as she spun around. Nonon struggled not to stare.

Mankanshoku had picked out the biggest, baggiest sweater and shortest skirt combo she could find in the first five minutes, declared them both perfect, and had fallen asleep in an armchair. Since then, she and Matoi had been dancing a silent and increasingly less subtle flirting tango, a battle where they both refused to admit they were checking each other out.

Matoi was stubborn and blunt, and she could respect that.

"Oi, Nonon- can I call you Nonon?- what are you wearing onstage? I mean, since you're helping me pick out an outfit."

"Uh, just the usual-"

"You'd look good in an outfit like this," she said, gesturing to herself. "No lie."

"Thanks. You look good too." God, she was suffocating in this tiny dressing room. The lights were too bright, the air too stale, and there was a pretty half dressed girl trying to hit on her. "Really, uh, cute. Red suits you a lot. I like what you did with your hair."

"Thanks. I like the pink too. Your roots are perfect."

"Yeah." She looked away, desperate for something to focus on that wasn't the way her rack looked killer in tight red lace. "There's a hair out of place-"

“Hm? Can you fix that for me?” She leaned down, and now her view was even better and she could smell her cinnamon gum. Silently, Nonon cursed her hand for shaking. She had barely brushed a stray hair out of her face before Nonon noticed how close their faces were, and how Ryuko was staring at her mouth.

Matoi was not very good at this whole flirting schtick.

“Your lipstick is also red,” she managed intelligently, before said lipstick was approaching her own, non-lipsticked mouth. So much for subtlety. Something brushed against the pocket of her jacket, and she tensed.

Briefly, she wondered if she was a better kisser than Satsuki before she felt warm breath against her chin, and she let her eyelids drop before a loud bang cut them off.

“Hope you’re all decent, I’m coming in.”

Ryuko let out a groan under her breath and wheeled around to find an incredibly unimpressed looking Shiro staring at them from the doorway.”

“What if I’d been getting dressed?” She demanded, waving at her clothes. “You need to learn to knock, mister four eyes or whatever your name is. Announcing your presence doesn’t count.”

To his credit, Shiro’s eyes didn’t waver from Nonon’s, judging her wordlessly. “I’m sure you were very busy getting dressed, and I’m sorry for interrupting this, er, intense fashionable debate I definitely just crashed, but I’m here to give you your ten minute warning. Freshbloods, you’re to start setting up. That means miss sleepyhead over there, too.”

Mankanshoku started immediately. “Wha-”

It was a damn good thing she loved Shiro like a brother, because she was itching to strangle him and his little smirk.

“Nonon, meet us in the main dressing room. And uh,” he eyed Ryuko one last time before closing the door “keep your panties on.”

“Go fuc-”

The door slammed behind him, and she could hear him snickering to himself. Too late, she noticed how she was clutching onto the vanity with both hands. Goddamnit.

“What a dick,” Ryuko whispered. If she wasn’t mistaken, there was legitimate awe in her voice. “I bet he and Tsumugu would get along.”

“The totally ripped punk guy?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow.”

She stretched upwards and sighed deeply. “Sorry about that, though.”

“It’s fine. It’s not like I-”

Ryuko stared at her, completely deadpan, until she could feel her face heating up. “Fine, alright, I was flirting back. Something you’re terrible at, by the way.”

“I don’t usually flirt, to be honest. I usually just get piss drunk and wake up next to some hot babe.”

“That explains the fact that you’re about as delicate as a grizzly bear performing brain surgery, red.”

“Alright, pink.” Her laugh was surprisingly cute, all things considered. “How about I buy you a drink later and we keep this brilliant conversation going, hmm?”

“Sounds good.”

Nonon couldn’t help herself from smiling as Ryuko pulled away from her and threw an arm over the still-drowsy girl with the pixie.

“Time to start our rock star legacy, Mako,”

It wasn’t until after their footsteps had stopped echoing in the small room and she was alone that she took the time to check her pocket. There was a slip of paper there, and she snorted to herself.

Here are my digits: (xxx) xxx-xxxx. Call me!!!

“Dumbass,” she muttered.

If anyone else had been in the room, they’d have pointed out she was grinning anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delays in updating! My tumblr is, as usual, satsukichan, where you can ask me stuff!

boys wanna be her

Chapter Summary

You've got them all by the balls,
Causin' waterfalls, stone walls, bar brawls
Climbing stalls at concert halls
To you they crawl, body sprawl,
Smokin' Pall Malls, close call, stand tall,
Doll, you make them feel so small
(And they love it)

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! Chapter updates should continue on the regular bi-monthly schedule from now on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Satsuki could pinpoint the exact moment Freshbloods started playing.

The crowd cheering resonated with the entire structure, and the guitar chords and yelling of the band onstage echoed through the walls. They sounded pretty good live, from what she could tell- the room was supposed to be soundproofed but the door was cracked to prevent the air from going stale. She had little more than the vibrations and sheer volume of screaming to guess, but the reception seemed positive. She'd made a good choice.

Everyone inside was restless. Nonon sighed and looked at the mirror, fiddling with a piece of paper and her phone, twirling the chupa chup in her mouth every twenty seconds. There was a beat everywhere, from the way Uzu's feet tapped against the floor when his leg bounced, to Houka's fingers clicking on the keyboard, and Ira's fingers drumming a beat on the table. The five of them looked good- really good, actually, thanks to the makeup team. They'd even managed to hide the hickies Houka thought she hadn't noticed.

(One thing her bandmates had yet to figure out- Satsuki noticed everything. If she hadn't commented on Houka and Shiro's rendezvous in the backseat of a limo, it was because that would involve having to think of her childhood friend banging her second guitarist, and that was not a mental image she wanted pre-show.)

In any case, it was a shame the stylists hadn't been able to do anything about Uzu, who was currently lolling in his armchair, clearly blazed out of his right mind. At least the weed made

him quiet, but a drowsy Uzu Sanageyama wasn't much better, all things considered.

Well, as long as he could play, there should be no problem. She sighed to herself and savored the warmth of the teacup radiating into her hands.

Freshbloods would play for about an hour before they took the stage. It was time for her to zen out, enjoy the tea Soroi had so thoughtfully prepared for them, and relax before she had to scream in front of the crowd. Maybe a twenty minute power nap would help. She reached for a hair tie, pulled all three feet of her hair into a ponytail, and sunk deeper into her plush armchair. It was warm and comfortable in this room, with the only lights being those of the vanities to her back. Finally, she could get some peace and quiet today.

She'd only just closed her eyes before her phone went off, buzzing obnoxiously to the dramatic tune of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, and an expletive slipped past her before she could catch herself.

"Shit," she muttered, and picked up the phone warily.

Ira looked up in mild surprise. "Again?"

"Twice in one day." Satsuki rubbed her temples in irritation. Fate was going to keep blaring out at her unless she picked up, but this was a phone call she wasn't exactly eager to take. Unfortunately, she knew from experience that there were few things Ragyo Kiryuin hated more than being made to wait, so it was with very visible reluctance that she pressed the button to accept the call.

"Hello, mother."

"What's with your tone?"

She had to bite away her remark before her mother picked up on it, if only to appease her. Unfortunately, her mother's irritation showed through in the way she sighed, whiting out the noise on her end with a crackle of static.

"My apologies, mother. I'm currently taking a nap-"

"Really, Satsuki? Napping?"

"We didn't get to sleep well, with Uzu and everything this morning-"

He stirred behind her in his seat at the mention of his name, mumbled something to himself, and went back to drooling on his own shoulder.

"To which I say you should have let him be. Don't fear infamy, Satsuki. It can be the greatest thing to happen to your wallet."

Satsuki sighed and stared at her knees. There was a rip in the denim she'd paid to have professionally done, even if the person in charge had made a choked noise when she handed over a three hundred dollar pair of True Religion jeans.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of two phone calls in one day?”

“You flatter me, hon.” She could hear her smiling through the speakers. “I just thought you might like to know that Purity is finally on the plane back to the US. You don’t have to play with those dreadful hobos any longer.”

“Hobos?”

“Those Freshbloods. I assume they’ve already taken the stage, seeing as it’s almost nine, in which case I suppose it’s too late to boot them off. But there’s no need to keep them along for the rest of the tour.”

“What if they like them?”

“Excuse me?”

Something inside her seethed with anger that she didn’t know she was capable of mustering at this level of exhaustion. “The crowd. What if the crowd likes them?”

“They’re not signed to my label. Purity is. You’re touring with Purity.”

“But-”

A crinkling noise by her ear caught her off guard. Lollipop still in her mouth, Nonon leaned over and crumpled the wrapper of the sweet by the mouthpiece of her phone.

“Satsuki, hon, you’re breaking up.”

Thank you, she mouthed at Nonon, who merely nodded in response and continued crinkling the cellophane.

“Sorry, Mother, I’ll call you right back.”

The tension dissolved immediately as she hung up. Everyone in the room let out a breath of relief as a single unit.

“Good idea, Nonon,” Houka quipped, eyes not so much as flickering away from his screen. “How are you feeling, Satsuki?”

“I’m fine.” It took more self control than she knew she was capable of mustering to not grimace. Instead, she sunk into her chair and let her head fall back, a small luxury of weakness she allowed herself after having to tolerate her mother. “I can only hope our opening band is doing alright.”

Acid churned in the pit of her stomach, breath warm and sticky when she crooned into the microphone, fingers slick with sweat, slipping on her strings. She couldn't hear anything but the roar of the crowd and the sound of her blood rushing through her ears.

The adrenaline rush was incredible, and if she was shaking, it was with emotion.

This. This was it.

This was what she'd been waiting her whole life for.

It wasn't like she was particularly fond of crowds, or even being the center of attention. But she lived for the buzz, the halfway there limbo that was being caught up in song, where she was music itself.

Or something like that.

Truth be told, if you asked her, Ryuko wouldn't be able to answer why she'd wanted to start a band. Or why she loved playing the guitar. It was a natural part of who she was at this point in time, really. Or maybe her blissed out state had something to do with the fact that she'd never had so many people enthusiastically listening to every snarl into the mike, every note, every word. It made her feel very oddly... powerful.

No wonder Kiryuin walks around like she's the queen of the world, she thought.

It was addicting. She could get used to this.

They love us, she marveled, their amps distorting the last few notes of the song. It was an incredible sensation. It was almost dizzying, so many people screaming- a faceless mass of humanity, cheering. Cheering for her. For them. *They love me.*

The cheering of the crowd bolstered her nerves, and an idea popped into her head. Hesitantly, she turned around, and mouthed at the others before sliding the guitar off her shoulder.

It only took a few seconds for them to communicate, and then she turned back to face the crowd, roaring. It left her breathless, although it could have been her screaming into the mic only a minute ago. Maybe she should cut back on the cigarettes.

"This one," she breathed into the mic, "is a personal favorite of mine. And seeing who let us open for them, I feel it's also appropriate."

She surveyed the the crowd, who murmured its excitement, and she jerked her chin at Mako, who nodded, and put her foot down on the bass drum pedal.

Between the heavy beats, she spoke.

"Y'all ever heard of an artist called Peaches?"

The crowd broke out in raucous cheering.

There were times Mako wondered if she'd done the right thing.

This was not an uncommon thought for her. Despite what people generally agreed was her alarmingly bright disposition, she did have serious thoughts, occasionally. For example, why they called candy corn candy corn despite resembling a striped christmas tree or a yellowed tooth, or perhaps why you drove on a parkway and parked on a driveway.

This she usually chalked up to the english language still making zero sense, which she was okay with. Not making sense was completely fine in her book.

Then there what she called her adult thoughts, like if it was okay for her to have not finished nursing school. Or if she'd done the right thing to skip her certification exam in lieu of running away with her best friend and sister to start a band on a whim. Mako didn't mind doing things on a whim, and often followed her impulses, but she'd often wondered if it'd been the right thing for them. For her, even.

It wasn't like she didn't love playing the drums, or that she didn't want to play music- it was fun to play music with friends. She loved playing until their neighbors screamed at them through the walls and threatened to call the police, she loved the cacophony of their music- her drums, Senketsu's bass, Tsumugu's guitar, Ryuko's singing.

But there were times she second guessed herself. These times were usually the times they could only afford to eat cup noodle and hope nobody's instrument needed repairing. Those times weren't fun. At home, she'd always been poor, but at least her parents had refused to let her go hungry.

So it was a great relief to see the rapture on Ryuko's face. Ryuko had many expressions- anger, annoyance, irritation, exhaustion, sheer murderous rage- but the one on her face was rare to see in her usual gamut of emotions.

Mako couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her so happy.

So she threw herself into the music, ignored the buzz of her eardrums, and hit the cymbals harder, focusing only on the physical beat of the song echoing through the hall.

God, he needed an advil.

Shiro unscrewed the top of the pill bottle, squinted suspiciously at the side, and popped double the recommended dose into his mouth, swallowing dry. He'd take the organ damage if it meant his head would stop throbbing.

Maybe you should have picked a different job if you didn't wanna worsen your migraines, his common sense chided. *You don't get to complain.*

Well, his common sense could go fuck itself. He liked his job, even if it meant a dangerously high caffeine and ibuprofen intake. It was creative, engaging, and ultimately rewarding- even if it meant putting up with a lot of bullshit.

Like everything a certain washed up has-been was currently yelling at him over the phone.

"Shiro, you know I think of you as a nephew, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He deserved a goddamn raise.

"Call me Auntie." Ragyo said calmly. There was nothing remotely familiar in the tone of her voice, however. "I know you're very loyal to Satsuki and her... *choices*... "

"Creative decisions."

"*Mistakes*. They're mistakes, and you should know perfectly well what they are. You're making one right now."

"Excuse me, ma'am?"

"*Auntie*. However loyal you might be to Satsuki and her... creative vision... you're forgetting who writes your checks."

"Er, Auntie Ragy-"

"You're on my payroll, Shiro, not hers. Need I remind you that you work for me? Nephew or not, I can and will replace you with someone more willing to do what needs to be done."

"... Is that a threat or..."

"It's a promise."

He resisted the urge to swear under his breath. It wasn't easy. The advil was taking its sweet time to start working.

"Ma'am, *please* understand, Satsuki is very strong-willed. Even if I wanted to change her mind-"

"How would you like to not have a job?"

"Ma'am-"

"How would your uncle like to not have a job? He's getting in on years, Shiro. Mitsuzo has worked for me for many years. It'd be a shame."

Shiro felt the blood drain from his face. “You can’t fire my uncle. Ma’am,” he added hurriedly.

“He’s worked for me since I was a child. But he’s, what, seventy? How long can he work for her before he inevitably drops? We should think of his health. Work with me.”

His kingdom for pain relief. He sighed heavily. The music from the stage to his back was only making his head pound more violently.

“Tell me if you can do it. If not, I’m afraid we’ll have to look for a new manager. I can’t have someone unreliable working for me.”

“What if you sign Freshbloods?”

The words were out of his mouth before he registered what they meant. There was a long silence from her end as he silently panicked. Before he could take them back, however, she spoke up.

“That could work.”

“Really?” He said weakly.

“It’s not half bad, as far as ideas go. They tour, we sign them, they’ll have had the exposition already so I don’t need to schedule a second one, they drop an album under my label, I get their first two singles on every radio station from here to Beijing. I can’t believe I didn’t think of this before.”

“Well, er-”

“Good thinking, Shiro.” There was a smile in the way she spoke. “I’ll see about that promotion you mentioned earlier.”

“Wait-”

The line went dead, leaving him looking at the phone in his hand blankly. The music thudding behind him came to a crescendo, and he heard a very distinct guitar screech and the crowd roaring. Fingers pinched the bridge of his nose, and Shiro sighed painfully.

It was time to call them up to the stage, and maybe invest in some faster acting painkillers.

She could feel the electricity of the crowd when she stepped out. There was genuine excitement, the kind that could only come from being pleasantly surprised, and eagerness for continued pleasant surprises. She'd chosen well. Or rather, Uzu had.

Satsuki stole a glance at her bassist, who, though upright, was clearly not going to be on terra firma for a long while. At least he had good taste in musicians. It was worth following her gut instinct every once in a while.

“Sanageyama.”

“Whu-” He spun around, looking around blearily. “Mom- uh, Satsuki?”

Lagging just a few feet behind her, Houka and Nonon shared a look before bursting into ugly snickers. Ira could only sigh in irritation, something that she could feel building up inside her. Holy hell, she could *physically* feel her patience draining.

“Uzu. Can you play?’

“Yeah. I think.”

“You think or you know?”

“I know, jeez.”

“I’m just checking. You are *not* embarrassing me out there.”

“Can I embarrass myself?”

“You’re already doing that.”

“Ow,” he muttered. “Stone cold.”

She refused to grace him with an answer, and shoved him none too gently instead. “Get out there.”

"Stone cold, Satsuki. Stone fuckin’ cold."

He obliged regardless. Satsuki exchanged eye rolls with Nonon and followed him out onto the center of the stage.

There was a chant going on, complete with rhythmic foot stomping and clapping, that greatly bolstered her nerves. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes, and they were cheering her name over and over again.

“***SATSUKI. SATSUKI. SATSUKI. SATSUKI-***”

The guitar hanging off her shoulder had a comfortable heft to it. In her hands, Bakuzan was a weapon against her mother, but more importantly, an instrument for creating the most important thing in the world.

Punk rock.

“How are you doing, Seattle?”

The first chord could barely be heard over the screaming of two thousand people desperate to hear her play.

Had it been one song? Five? Twenty three? He couldn't tell, but at least he was sure he was playing well enough that nobody noticed how fucked up he was.

Uzu strummed the bass, and felt the crowd swell beneath him like the floor of a bouncy castle. Everything was moving, and the air felt electric, but in all honesty, he wasn't entirely sure how much of it was the excitement of their fans, and how much of it was the drugs coursing through his system.

In retrospect, he probably shouldn't have followed that last blunt with another one, especially when he wasn't used to this strain. Shit.

He strummed a chord absently, mind preoccupied. Shit. Fuck. Shit, how did their latest single go?

Uh, it started with a bassline, so that was him. He had to play something. Also he sang? He definitely did a lot of singing. Okay. Okay. Okay- fuck, everything was buzzing.

The crowd seemed impatient, but maybe it was just his imagination. God, he hoped for his sake that he hadn't just been drooling on his mic for five minutes or something, although with the way time was moving, it'd probably only been a few seconds since the echoes faded out from their last set. His mouth was dry as dirt. Where'd he put his water?

He swung his bass off his shoulder and set it in its stand. Momentarily, he looked lost, almost puppylike in the way he searched for the gallon he'd set up in case cottonmouth ensued. His foot nudged something heavy, and the blessed plastic container was there. Thank fuck.

"Hold up just a moment, Seattle," he drawled into the mic.

The cap he popped off with a single thumb. Fuck, he was thirsty. And it was really hot up underneath the lights. His adam's apple bobbed as he drank, and then he figured, why not? He was kinda sweaty already, and pit stains were gross. This way, nobody would notice them.

When he was as blasted as he was now, his brain liked to play tricks on him, but Nonon's groan was pretty familiar, weed or no weed. The water plastered his hair to his face, soaking his shirt so thoroughly he could see his new tattoo through it.

Of course, he made sure to save enough for later, but he'd poured enough that he was standing in a puddle he hadn't meant to make.

My apologies to the stagehands, he thought, before he turned to face Seattle again.

“I’m sure you all know the lyrics to this one,” he slurred out, holding onto the mic like it was a lifeline. “They’ve been playing it on the radio enough times that we’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

Except Uzu, he couldn’t remember for the fucking life of him how it started. The crowd was roaring, and Ira’s stage whispers grew more and more menacing.

“Uzu, stop messing around and *start playing the damn song already*.”

Wait.

His fingers slipped into a familiar rhythm, and he was only three notes in before the crowd went wild. The screaming jogged the lyrics back in place.

Load up on guns, bring your friends-

Wait, no, that wasn’t it either. He wasn’t sure of a lot of things at the moment, but he was pretty damn sure that was the wrong song. Ira’s face flushed purple, but the others only had seconds to adjust before he started in earnest.

In his peripheral vision, he could just make out Houka and Nonon mouthing death threats at him before the drums came in.

Really, she wished she could say this was the stupidest stunt he’d pulled mid-concert. At least this time he hadn’t ripped his shirt off (not, yet, at least), or puked on anyone. Absently, she wondered how long they had before he whipped out any part of his anatomy they couldn’t show on TV, or passed out on stage. The way he was going lately, she wasn’t going to bet against it.

And of course he’d chosen a song she couldn’t play along to. Awkwardly, she held her violin at her sides as everyone else went in, Satsuki strumming like she’d meant for this to happen, Houka less so. Did she put her violin down? Try and play along?

Nonon settled for clapping to the beat and trying her hardest to not scowl at Uzu’s back. This was made significantly more difficult by the fact that he’d worn a white t-shirt that was now almost completely transparent. What a fucking shithead.

(She didn’t like the way her eyes lingered. That could only lead down a path of bad, bad ideas.)

Bad ideas like Vancouver-

Shut up, you, she snapped at the small voice in the back of her head. *I don’t need to think about Vancouver, especially now of all times.*

Kudos to Kurt, this song went on forever. Her hands were sore from clapping, her face from smiling, and it was in that moment that Nonon realized she hated this song. She'd never quite had the chance to appreciate how long it was until now, though. In that moment, she hated all of Nevermind. The entire grunge movement. But most of all, she hated Uzu Sanageyama and his bullshit stunts.

Smells like your daddy issues, you goddamned hot mess. Stupid monkey with shit for brains, she thought bitterly.

The small, obnoxious voice piped up again.

That's not what you said in Vancouver-

She explicitly forbid herself from thinking about Vancouver when she had a hot date with a certain guitarist that night. The only thing Uzu was good for was procuring weed when her own supply ran dry, cigarettes, and providing an eternal source of secondhand embarrassment, occasionally punctuated with amusement.

The song ended, the crowd cheered, and she thought about going down on Matoi instead of the way his shirt clung to his abs.

His neck was sore from bobbing to the beat of the songs he'd been playing for what felt like eternity, but couldn't have been more than two hours. The hall felt bigger than it was without the people crammed into it. Were he a more sentimental type, he'd be inclined to say it felt lonely, but he'd leave the bad poetry to dumb fucks like Sanageyama, who was definitely a lot more sober and much more irritated to be under Gamagoori's strict supervision.

Shiro kissed him quickly backstage as he walked offstage, guitar slung over his shoulder. He leaned into the peck, opened his mouth to savor the taste of his tongue, but before they could really get going, Ira's hand on his shoulder was tugging him along. Silently, they exchanged looks, promises of activities later that night.

(Shiro's eyes burned gold, a sign that their quickie in the limo was merely a prelude.)

Something just as familiar and significantly more unpleasant got more and more obvious as they walked through the hall, however. The shouts got less muffled as they approached the dressing room door, and he and Ira exchanged looks before cracking it open.

They were at it again, like warring alleycats. It never failed to impress him how constant their bickering was. Houka adjusted his glasses, pushing them up the bridge of his nose as he stood back and watched the two blow up at each other.

"Just because you wish you could have sucked Kurt Cobain's dick doesn't mean you get to pull impromptu Nirvana covers," Nonon snapped.

“Dave Grohl was more my type,” he snarked back. “Bitter you didn’t get to play anything?”

“Uzu, shut the fuck up.” She rubbed a knot forming between her eyebrows and sighed deeply. “You’re such a dumbass, it’s not even funny anymore.”

“Maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea,” Satsuki interjected. “It *did* pump up the crowd, if not for the right reasons.”

Ira jumped. Neither of them had noticed her following them, but she slipped into the room between them, a hand on her hip and an eyebrow arched, looking too much like a knowing mother to feel comfortable slouching. Everyone automatically straightened up.

“Yeah, Satsuki’s right." Uzu said, grinning at Nonon with his trademark Insufferable Jackass smile. "There’s only one song that gets white people more pumped up than Smells Like Teen Spirit, and I’m not about to bust out the Journey covers.”

Nonon opened her mouth, shut it, and sighed. “I’m not arguing with that logic.”

“It’s idiotproof.”

“Emphasis on idiot.”

“Oi-”

A shorter figure wriggled into the room, again, shoving his way between Ira and his shoulder. He smiled at his boyfriend, but they didn’t notice. His eyes narrowed at the two squabbling, and he pointed a finger threateningly at them.

“Both of you, shut up,” Shiro grumbled. “Your voices carry down the hall, and I think I need a stiff drink.”

Uzu rubbed the back of his head with a shiteating grin on his face. “You know, so could I.”

“Not on my watch, you don’t.”

Ira appeared as if by magic, to the vocal annoyance of Uzu.

"Oh, come on, don't you have anything better to do than babysit me?"

"Trick question. The answer, is, unfortunately, no."

“Fuck.”

Houka looked at his phone, desperate to ignore the conversation threatening his IQ. “Are you guys gonna be at the afterparty?”

Nonon was the first to reply. “Yeah, why?”

“Our ride will be here in fifteen minutes. Weren’t you bragging about Matoi earlier? Grab her before we miss our limo.”

“Shit.”

She was darting out of the room before he could say anything else. Uzu’s eyebrows crinkled in confusion.

“Wait, what?”

But everyone was already gathering their things.

“What did you mean, Matoi. What the…”

“Nonon’s got a date,” Shiro deadpanned, curling an arm around Houka’s waist. “What, you jealous?”

He hesitated, just long enough for Ira to raise an eyebrow.

“Really?”

Uzu shook his head vigorously in denial. “Nah. Just caught me off guard.”

That didn’t explain how crestfallen he was, but Shiro was leaning in for another kiss, and Houka wasn't sufficiently invested in Uzu Sanageyama’s trainwreck of a love life to care about the way he slouched a little further down, hands in his pockets.

They all had better things to do.

Tsumugu saw a familiar flash of blue in the crowd, and exhaled deeply. Thank god, he wasn’t going to be stuck babysitting a bunch of young twenty-somethings all night.

(This was disregarding that he himself was a twenty-something, but goddammit, he was twenty-*six*. That had to count for something, right?)

“Sorry, Matoi.”

“Huh?” She looked up from phone in confusion. He grinned at her her and jerked a thumb at Aikuro waving in the crowd. “Oh. That fucker.”

“Guess we’re not drinking together tonight. Rack up a huge bill on their tab for me, alright?” Tsumugu shouldered his bag and gave Mako a friendly pat on her head. She stuck her tongue out at him, and he chuckled, ruffling her hair playfully. “Mako, keep an eye out on Ryuko, okay? Make sure she doesn’t drink too much.”

“You know, I’m right here-”

Mako cut her off. “I’ll try my best, at least. I can’t protect any bikers from her if she gets going, but I’ll practice my lockpicking skills in case we don’t break even tonight and bail is tough.”

“Good. And you-” he wheeled around to look at the tin can glaring at him behind crossed arms. “You take care of them. Make sure they get back to the hotel safely.”

Senketsu scoffed. “Didn’t think you trusted me that much.” The derision in his voice was obvious, but Tsumugu supposed he deserved that much from his attitude earlier.

“I trust you when it comes to caring about Ryuko and Mako, alright? I know you care about them, even if they’re a handful.”

Senketsu huffed, but didn’t retort.

“Anyway, I’m off.” His weight made the floorboards creak when he stood, and Ryuko murmured something he didn’t quite catch.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“I said, send my regards to your shitty boyfriend. Remind him he still owes me a cab fare and twenty bucks from our last pool game. Oh, and that if he sends me one more innuendo laced email asking me to model for his sleazy stripper gear line again, I’m gonna shove my foot so far up his ass your adopted babies will have my shoe size stamped on their foreheads.”

“You guys are cousins.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t or won’t wreck his shit. Anyway, please tell him that, if you guys have any time to speak in between games at your tonsil hockey olympics.”

“You don’t get to tell me off about public displays of affection when you were making heart eyes at that pink haired smurfette look alike. And you’re on my case for fucking in public when you were practically undressing her with your eyes.”

“Yeah, well, your *exhibitionist* of a boyfriend- ”

“Oi, you’re the one related to him- ”

She cut him off with a scoff. “And anyway, with some luck I’ll be undressing her with my actual hands by the end of the night. Go over to him and get out of here, already. Leave him alone for too long and he’ll probably start stripping again. At the very least, he’s probably hitting on the general populace.”

“You’re not wrong,” he muttered, keeping a cautious eye on Aikuro in his peripheral vision. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Be safe, the both of you, no matter what you do.”

“Yeah, proper condom use, don’t get each other pregnant, whatever,”

His only response was to reach into his wallet and throw one at her face. She yelped in surprise and caught it out of reflex before she realized what she was holding and rolled her

eyes.

“Don’t you need this more? There are definitely more dicks in your equation.”

“Yeah, but you can make a dental dam with a condom, you know. Be safe, no matter who you choose to fuck.”

Ryuko put a hand on her hip as she pocketed the tiny foil package. “I’m touched by your concern, really, but won’t you miss this?”

“You really think he’d forget to carry around a rubber? Oh, and that one’s cherry flavored, if it helps.”

“Oh *god*.”

He ignored her exaggerated gagging noises and smirked. “Good luck with Princess Bubblegum.”

“Yeah, thanks, have fun,” she mumbled, looking a little green.

The last thing he heard before he walked out of earshot was Mako wondering what his favorite flavor was, and Ryuko and Senketsu loudly telling her to shut up in perfect sync.

She was surrounded by people, but the weird android and the tiny girl with the enormous rack were hard to miss, as was the red of her hair. She turned, however, when she cleared her throat, and Nonon did her best to ignore the fact that she had to look down quite a bit to be able to see her.

“Oh, hey, it’s you.” A genuine smile crossed her face, and that made up for the fact that four inch heels barely brought her up to the lower tiers of her eye level. “What’s up?”

“You heading to the afterparty?” Nonon tried to keep her voice casual, but it was proving impossible, with all of her curves right at eye level.

Ryuko looked at her blankly before nodding furiously. “Uh, yeah! Yeah, I am-”

“What happened to you being all slick?” Pixie Cut was grinning, arms crossed, at an increasingly flushed Ryuko.

“Shuddup, Mako,” she grumbled. “A-anyway, what about the party?”

“You need a ride?”

“A ride?”

“Yeah, we have a limo coming for everyone in a few minutes. I was wondering if you might want to hitch a ride with us.”

Nonon hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. Maybe it was working, because she perked up immediately.

“That’d be great-”

“Wait.”

The android cleared their throat and looked down at them, eyebrows stitched together. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but… What about Mako and I?”

Ryuko looked at them blankly. “Huh?”

“We have no way of getting back to the hotel. I can’t drive, and Mako’s still on probation. And we really can’t afford a cab.”

“Ah. Shit.”

Nonon watched with a sinking feeling as she scratched the back of her head and sighed heavily.

“Listen, look, you’re really hot and all, but I can’t ditch my friends… I’m sorry… “

Deep in her gut, a realization dawned on her, conflicting excitement and dread intermingling with the butterflies in her stomach.

You’ll regret this, the voice in her head warned her. *You’re going to regret doing this. You don’t get to complain that I didn’t warn you.*

Anything if it’ll make you shut the hell up and get me laid, she argued back, ignoring for the moment the ridiculousness of arguing with herself. *She’s hot. It’s a small sacrifice. And anyway, I’ll pawn them off on Ira, let him babysit them.*

“You could come with us, if you want? I’ll have someone bring your stuff back to the hotel.”

“You’re inviting us to a party?”

Mankanshoku’s eyes were huge and bright, and Nonon bit back the instinct to say no. Instead she smiled widely, hoping the insincerity didn’t show through. “Yeah. But we have to hurry, our limo-”

“We’re going to a party, Ryuko!”

Mako threw her arms around Ryuko’s waist, grinning, and Nonon crossed her fingers, silently praying she hadn’t fucked up, big time.

The wolf whistle assured him he'd been spotted. It only took a second to find the source of the appreciative noise, and it came from the handsomest man at the bar, sunglasses reflecting the lights twinkling off the hanging wine glasses. Even without the other markers that made Aikuro Mikisugi who he was, the Chesire like expression crossing his face was unmistakable. He had to resist the urge to yank his mirrored shades out of his hands when he lowered them down his nose and smirked at him. What a douche.

Tsumugu was dating the asshole in the charcoal slouch beanie and dark blue hair, after all. His black pinstriped shirt had the collar popped, he'd chosen to accessorize with a tie so loose he might as well be wearing a scarf, a knockoff Rolex, and a highball in his hand. And the fucking shades, indoors, at almost *midnight*. Why the hell did he love this guy again?

He chose a good time to cut off the internal monologue in Tsumugu's head, if not with the most elegant words. "What's cookin', good lookin'?"

"Shut the hell up, Aikuro," he said, or at least he tried to say. Aikuro had apparently missed him, as he had taken the opportunity to tug him down by the front of his muscle shirt, and was currently kissing him.

Despite his stupid fashion sense more suitable for a college student than a thirty year old, making out with his hot boyfriend was definitely preferable to yelling at him. And truth be told, he loved him, although he'd die before he let him know that. He threw a hand out to steady himself against the bar and leaned into his mouth, ignoring the murmurs of the patrons around them and instead relishing the taste of vodka on his tongue. Fingers curled into his hair and pushed it out of his face, not so subtly knocking his shades away. Aikuro chuckled into his mouth and he felt his hands on the back of his head, almost cradling him while forcing his body closer. His knee buckled, pressing down between the older man's spread legs, and this time, he distinctly heard voices tinged with disapproval.

It wasn't in his disposition to interrupt a lovely makeout session due to the reactions of others, however, and he ignored them in lieu of dragging his hands down to hold his face, relishing the sharpness of his jaw against the palm of his hand. Aikuro's lips slipped away from his momentarily to catch his bottom lip with his teeth, nipping just shy of pain, and then planting a kiss on his chin, before returning to his mouth. He tilted his head to let his tongue slide into his mouth, and he breathed into him, resisting the urge to giggle at the way Aikuro's breath tickled his skin.

"Jesus fucking Christ, get a room," someone called across the room, and gentle laughter echoed as Tsumugu straightened up. They all shut up at once as he glared around the room, and opened his mouth to speak before he felt a hand on his forearm.

"Should we take this to the car?"

It wasn't a request, not really, but Tsumugu nodded anyway. Aikuro sighed and reached for his wallet before pausing.

"Shit, I should have asked first. You want anything to drink?"

Tsumugu ran a hand through his mohawk and shrugged as he sat down next to him. “Fuck if I care. I’d ask to have whatever you had, but I’m scared to ask.”

“This?” Aikuro shook his glass gently and grinned. “Sex on the beach.”

“Typical.” He snorted and jutted his chin at the bartender. “I’ll have a scotch on the rocks. Give me the nicest stuff you’ve got. The pricier, the better.”

He ignored Aikuro’s gasp of betrayal and flashed his stage pass at him, grinning. “Relax. Both of our drinks are going on Akechi Incident’s tab.” He looked up at the barkeep and gently shook the pass at him. “Got it?”

“Duly noted.”

“In that case-”

Tsumugu cut him off. “As much as I wanna stick it to the man and drink them dry, your performance suffers when you’ve had a few too many. Need I remind you of last St. Patricks?”

He grimaced. “Please don’t.”

“Thought so.” His drink arrived, and he threw it back without bothering to taste what he was sure was probably a very nice, ridiculously expensive liquor, overpriced because it’d come in contact with god’s dick or something, or whatever criteria they used to price their alcohol. When his glass was empty, he looked at it with mild surprise.

“That didn’t taste like complete shit. Nice.” He looked up. “Can you tell me-”

“Tsumugu.”

“Right.”

They stood as a single unit, stools scraping the floor as they murmured their farewells to the bartender. He ignored the eyes on them as they strode out the door, and Aikuro cheekily grabbed his hand, if only to spite the people muttering to themselves as they passed.

If only to further piss them off, he squeezed back.

Aikuro’s car wasn’t nearly as flamboyant as the man himself, but it’d be a significant feat to even come close. He leaned against it lazily, hips tilted towards him with the come hither expression in his eyes he liked to put on when they were alone. Or in a half empty parking lot. Whichever. If Ryuko was right about one thing involving Aikuro, it was his penchant for PDA, and Tsumugu’s eagerness to indulge him in it. No wonder they had a reputation.

Luckily for them, Ryuko wasn’t here, and neither was anyone else, really. Taking solace in that fact, he pressed his hips against his boyfriends’ and leaned towards him, pressing his lips against Aikuro’s and letting his own hands wander up to the top button on his shirt.

Hands that weren't his snaked past his waistband, and grabbed at his rear. Tsumugu let out a choked noise mid kiss, but Aikuro snickered into his mouth.

"Still rocking that butterfly ass, I see."

"I work out, it's not my fault- mrpghhh-"

Aikuro was kissing him again, and Tsumugu didn't particularly care if he had a butterfly ass or not when it was him squeezing it. For all his faults and obnoxious quirks, the man could kiss, and it had been a while since they'd last been able meet each other.

Unfortunately for him, his body reacted accordingly, and they were pressed close enough that Aikuro noticed immediately.

"Ooooh," he murmured into his ear, though he had to stretch a little to reach. "Someone's excited to see me."

"Shut up," Tsumugu shot back. "You're gonna have trouble getting it up in a few years, you don't get to make fun of my physiological reactions. I'm still young."

"You're so aggressive. But don't worry, I'll take it as a compliment," he whispered back, and fumbled in his pocket for a moment. The jangling of keys came with the accompanying beep of his car doors unlocking. "Shall we?"

"Please."

He pulled away with some regret, but slid in next to him in the car. The seats were leather, the windows tinted, the dashboard mahogany and certainly more expensive than anything he could afford. It wasn't until Aikuro closed the door behind him that he remembered.

"Wait. You've been drinking."

"One drink, an hour ago, on a full stomach." Aikuro corrected him. "I sat at the bar and nursed a glass of water while I waited for you. Bartender kept giving me dirty looks. And as for driving, I'm perfectly sober. But I won't start the car for a while, if it bothers you."

"Thanks," he muttered.

"We can have plenty of fun here," Aikuro added, and reached for his waistband.

Tsumugu jerked back instinctively. "Here?"

"Do you mind?" He retracted his hands and furrowed his brow, silently questioning the sudden redness of his cheeks. Tsumugu groaned and willed the blood away from his face and his dick, to no avail.

"I- well, no, but sex in a car is so-"

"Adolescent?"

“You’re *thirty*,” Tsumugu said lamely, slouching in the leather seat. “Isn’t there a point where you stop acting like a horny teenager?”

“Where’s the fun in growing old?” His fingers crept back into his lap and stroked him through the dark denim, forcing him to to stiffen his jaw lest he make embarrassing noises. “Is it the leather? Relax. If your hesitation is fear of ruining my upholstery, I’d like to remind you of that time I visited you in-”

“Don’t remind me.”

Aikuro chuckled, low and seductive. “If you’re so against fucking in my car, at least let me do this for you.”

His fingers undid his belt and fly with the speed only practice could allow, and Tsumugu swallowed, hard, and avoided eye contact as he leaned over to his lap.

“You don’t have to do that,” he grumbled, looking out the window in embarrassment. “Really.”

“Aw, but it’s been a while, and I think you missed me,” Aikuro mumbled into his thigh. "I don't mind. I think it's sexy when you moan."

Tsumugu very pointedly turned away from him as he felt him reach into his boxers. "I do no such thing."

"We'll see in a few minutes."

Briefly, he remembered that he’d left Ryuko with the epitome of corporate scum and only a tin can and a hyperactive kid to protect her from their clutches and shady contracts, but then Aikuro’s mouth was hot and wet, and he realized he wasn’t going to care about much for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

My tumblr is satsukichan, as usual, feel free to swing by and ask me about anything!

pretty woman

Chapter Summary

Pretty woman, don't walk on by
Pretty woman, make me cry
Pretty woman, don't walk away, hey...okay
If that's the way it must be, okay

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mako didn't do clubs often, and especially not fancy ones, with people getting turned down at the door, and even less often did she roll up to clubs in a limo.

A limo stuffed with the shining stars of the music industry, no less.

In any case, Ryuko was here (though her hand had been on Nonon's knee, now thigh, the entire time), as was Senketsu, on her other side, looking very blatantly uncomfortable with the whole situation. Across from her sat the guy she'd spent years watching stumble out of clubs on TMZ, and he was leaning against the door. Uzu looked like he was stuck at the intersection between nervous and irritated, and it showed in the way he tapped his fingers against his knee to the beat of the song.

The others had stopped at the shiny hotel to excuse themselves for the night, Satsuki included. It was a pity, Mako thought. Then again, she wasn't quite sure how long she'd be able to keep her composure around someone as overwhelmingly stunning as Satsuki Kiryuin.

She had been exceptionally kind, though, something that had taken her aback. It'd been fascinating to hear her speak on the phone, and mention their names, no less. She'd excused herself politely, and even shaken her hand.

Mako did not plan to wash that hand for a while.

The car glided to a stop in front of their destination. She knew it was their destination, mostly because there was a ridiculous amount of people in front of the small building, and also the lights and music would have been a dead giveaway had there not.

There was also the way everyone in the car tensed up as the car stopped.

"Satsuki's not here," Uzu spoke finally, interrupting the silence. "So the worst of the fans and paparazzi should miss us. We're just going to a party, is all."

“Right,” Nonon mumbled. “Still, you go out first. They’re less likely to fuck with the rest of us if you’re up front.”

She watched curiously as he wedged his way out the door. There was the murmur of a crowd, an errant click of a camera, and Nonon gestured brusquely towards the door.

“Whaddaya waitin’ for?”

Her shoes touched asphalt, and she looked up into the dizzying swarm of humanity, all bustling, murmuring crowds. The scent of beer hung heavy in the air, as did the cigarette smoke of everyone loitering around the entrance. The building seemed to pulse with the energy of the night, and she felt Ryuko’s hand squeeze hers as they slid out of the car.

The camera flashes hurt her eyes, so she averted her gaze, until she realized it wasn't her they were pointing at. Out from their ride came the stragglers. The boy with the seaweed hair groaned and threw a hand in front of his eyes as they lit up the night with photos, no doubt the before of the expected before and after pictures.

Senketsu wrapped his arm around her, and she realized then she was shivering, and he was warm, lab-grown skin and leather jacket familiar and comforting.

For some reason, Mako had the feeling it was going to be a long night.

It was his duty to drive. He knew that.

Although, if you asked any of the others, they would certainly call it what it actually was- stubbornness.

Really, it would be easier to let the company cars and limousines schlep him around, but Ira was nothing if he wasn't diligent, and there was a streak of pride there, though he refused to admit it. Mostly, however, he liked the sense of control that having a car implied, especially when he enjoyed relinquishing power in other, less socially acceptable ways.

Was it inconvenient? Certainly. The roadies that transported their instruments from city to city in their tour bus had to drive his car. Still, he wouldn't give up his now-signature pink cadillac for the world.

So he rolled his eyes at the valet parking, but handed the keys over. It was too distinctive a vehicle to steal or sell, anyway, and he had supervising to do.

The crowds parted easily before him, perhaps the best and most immediate perk of being over seven feet tall. He scanned the room with narrowed eyes, looking for his friends. Nonon, nowhere to be found. Houka and Shiro and Satsuki, comfortable in their respective hotel rooms. Uzu, MIA already, and it was only just past one in the morning. Great.

That just left Matoi and Mankanshoku and the weird android whose name he couldn't seem to remember. Their other guitarist had last been seen canoodling next to his boyfriend's car when he'd gotten into his, so he doubted he'd be seeing him for the rest of the night.

Ira managed to make his way through the throngs of partygoers to the tiny tables behind the corded-off VIP section. One would hope that having VIP access would grant them some more comfortable seating arrangements, but, alas, the world was not made to cater to people who looked like extras in an old Gojira film.

Still, he squirmed his way into the tiny booth. Now all he had to do was wait for the others to show up. Eventually.
Luckily, he did not have to wait that long. Green hair lit by the flashing lights was his first hint, and he had to keep himself from groaning internally.

"Satsuki actually let you come?"

"Guess who's babysitting tonight?"

"Not me," Ira deadpanned. "I was hoping to have a night off."

"Look, I'll be on my best behavior. Just let me have fun."

"Uzu, I don't know if anyone's ever told you this, but most people's idea of 'fun' doesn't end with STI testing."

"Look. I will be over there," Uzu gestured. "You can monitor me."

Ira followed his line of sight to the fully stocked bar, and groaned.

"You're to stay out of trouble," He warned. "I don't think I should let you drink..."

"I'll be responsible, I swear-"

"There isn't a single responsible cell in your body."

"But where's the fun if you don't live a little?"

"You can have fun. Sober."

"But-"

"You're the one who wanted to come to the party, Uzu. Don't complain."

Uzu's eyes glistened and widened dramatically. Ira averted his gaze immediately.

"Puppy dog eyes require some form of innocence to work on people," he grumbled. "That isn't going to-"

He made the mistake of peeking at his best friend, eyes shiny and huge in his face.

(He was going to regret this.)

There was a long silence between them before he sighed deeply.

"Just promise me you won't overdo it, okay?"

"I love you, bro," Uzu whispered. He grabbed hold of either side of his face and planted two obnoxiously loud smooches on either cheek, much to Ira's irritation. Before he could take anything back, however, Uzu was shimmying his way through the crowds with the expertise of a frat boy at a house party.

Ira groaned.

They sat on the curb when the others filed past the bouncer. There were definitely better places to sit, but this allowed them a modicum of privacy that the pounding music couldn't. There was something comforting in the early morning chill and the click of her lighter lighting the darkness, one tiny flame at a time.

Or maybe it was the small girl next to her, tapping her fingers against her cheek as she waited for her to take a drag.

"You've all the subtlety of an earthquake."

"Try harder. I've heard meaner." Ryuko paused before she smirked at Nonon, cigarette in hand. "I've yet to hear a single complaint, though."

"You are way too cocky for someone who can't even afford a cab," she snapped back. "Really."

"You offered a ride, I took the bait. 'S not my fault you're totally thirsty."

"You do not even get to call me thirsty when you slipped me your fucking number."

"Fair enough." She took a long drag on the end of her Newport and grinned through a mouthful of smoke. "I just needed someone cute to keep me company. You put me in your contacts?"

Nonon rolled her eyes. "Yeah, but I need a photo. Do you mind if I take one?"

"Nah, go knock yourself out."

"Yeah, hold up, let me just... find my phone... first..."

Nonon's voice cut off all of the sudden. Ryuko frowned.

"What's wrong?"

The shorter girl was deathly pale.

"My phone."

"What?"

Her hand was shoved deep in her pocket, but her face was pale. "I think I left my phone in the limo."

"Oh." Realization dawned on her slowly. "Oh shit."

"Goddammit. Fuck. Ugh." She ran a hand through her hair anxiously, rifled through her pockets again, and swore again. “Shit. I’m so fucked.”

“Do you need me to call the company?”

“No, it’s alright.” Her voice indicated that it was most definitely not alright, but Ryuko wasn’t arguing. “I’ll ask Ira to call Satsuki, she might be able to grab it. Worst case scenario, that limo's picking up any stragglers at 5 AM.”

“Right,” Ryuko said, hesitantly. “So, uh, should I-”

Nonon turned to face her, and irritation was thinly masked by a veneer of faux patience. “Go to the bar or something. Make friends. I’ll see you in a bit, alright? I just- that phone can’t fall into the wrong hands.”

“I figured as much,” she muttered, but Nonon was already gone, weaving expertly through the crowds of gyrating partygoers spilling out the alley door.

So much for a one night stand. Ryuko turned to give the entire club a good, hard look. There was a line of wannabes trailing down the street, but nobody had noticed her yet. Maybe it was for the best.

Either way, she stretched, the cold of the asphalt starting to worm its way through the denim of her shorts. Might as well have a few drinks to loosen up.

He'd only just settled at the bar when Nonon stormed in, eyes narrowed. There was fire in her eyes, and he mentally assessed what he'd done wrong.

"*Sanageyama.*"

"Jakuzure?"

"Satsuki," she said, hand extended. "Where's your phone?"

Disappointment colored his words more than he was proud to admit. "I s- lost it, remember? I'm getting a new one in a bit."

"If you're going to be completely useless, just point me in Ira's direction," she snapped. "I left my phone in the limo."

He took a long sip from his drink as she glared at him.

"Ask the nerd to wipe it if there's anything incriminating on it," he finally replied. "What, you got your nudes on there or something?"

The way she squirmed uncomfortably told him more than the mumbling under her breath. Uzu smirked at her over his glass.

"Bullseye, huh?"

"Shut it," she threatened. "Some of us actually care about who gets to see us naked."

He sighed and stared into the dregs of his drink. "What about that Matoi chick? You're trying to get into her pants, right?"

"What about her?"

"Mind if I keep her company while you look for your phone? I've got some questions to ask her."

"She's gay," Nonon said flatly.

"Correction, she likes girls," Uzu shot back. He caught himself and cleared his throat. "But we're not competing. I'm under Ira-style house arrest right now anyway."

"So you expect me to believe you're doing this out of the goodness of your own heart?"

"Yes? At least you'll know where she is when you come back. And besides," he raised his drink and looked at her knowingly, "What else are friends for?"

Nonon glared at him for a long moment. He did his very best to look as innocent as possible, something that was significantly easier to do when he wasn't drinking whiskey straight. They stared at each other for so long he felt his eyes watering before she sighed and looked away.

"You promise you won't try anything?" The resignation in her voice made it clear enough what she thought of his promises, but he nodded anyway.

"Scout's honor."

"Fine."

“Good luck finding your phone, by the way.”

Nonon nodded, then hesitated before grabbing his glass and pouring the entirety of its contents into her mouth. She ignored his choked gasp of betrayal and glared at him before he could retaliate.

“You’re not allowed to get her drunk, okay? Three drink limit.”

“What kind of creep do you think I am? Jeez, Nonon,”

“I don’t think you’re a creep,” she muttered. “You’re a lot of things, but even I’ll admit your impressive talent at getting tail.”

“It’s my good looks and incredible charm. But finally, someone acknowledges me.”

“I take it back.”

Uzu snorted unattractively and poured another drinks’ worth of whiskey into his glass. “I’ll be the perfect image of a gentleman. You should get on finding your phone before that cabbie decides we didn’t tip them enough and gets curious...”

“Fuck-”

“...but they’ll be back in a few hours, so chances are, it’ll still be there-”

He swatted her hand away from his drink again before continuing.

“Stop that. Go rescue your nudes.”

Nonon looked caught between snarking back at him and going off. Blearily, he leaned on the palm of his hand and let his eyelids droop for a moment before he managed a smile. The corners of her mouth twitched in response.

“Fine,” she muttered eventually. “But don’t overdo it, okay? You or her.”

“You concerned about me, Jakuzure?”

“Suck my ass.”

Uzu laughed at that. Her eyes rolled back into her skull, and she turned smartly on her heel.

“Good luck, Nonon.”

She stopped dead in her tracks. Curious, he tilted his head to the side.

“Nonon?”

Kudos to her, like her namesake, she was lightning fast. Her hand snaked out to grab his glass again, and this time he only sighed when she chugged the entire thing.

“Maybe you should take it easy on the liquor, too-”

“Don’t you worry about me,” Nonon said curtly. “You’ve got yourself to take care of, first.”

“Right,” he said, but she was already pushing her way past the people dancing together.

A low appreciative whistle rang out behind him. He quirked an eyebrow and swiveled in the direction of the bartender, who made a point to look away from the full bottle of Jack Daniels he was clutching in his spare hand.

“She your girlfriend?”

“Nah.” Uzu poured another measure into the glass, ignoring the way the bartender smirked at him. “Just a friend. A close one, too, even if she doesn’t like to admit it to herself.”

“What kind of friend doesn’t lend a friend a phone?”

“Huh?”

The man jerked his chin at his pocket. Curious, he stuck a hand in and- oh.

“Oops.”

The new phone Houka had given him only hours ago sat neatly in his pocket, shiny and free of fingerprints. He pulled it out, guiltily, and swiped at the screen.

It was in perfect condition.

The passcode was the same. His backgrounds were the same. Did the nerd keep a backup of his phone saved for this occasion? His dedication was impressive. A long list of contacts he never called or touched whizzed past his fingertips as he scrolled. Dozens of one night stands he’d had were lined up in perfect alphabetical order, never to be seen or contacted again. Something about the idea of his contacts list made him uneasy, and he clicked out of the app before it could make him any antsier than he already was.

Uzu thought of the girl from that morning. He couldn’t remember her face too well, and it felt like it’d been an eternity ago, though his phone’s clock assured him it’d only been twelve hours. Jesus.

Part of him hoped she was okay, at least- she’d been pretty wasted. Maybe he should call-

It hit him then, that he had no idea if he’d ever even asked for her name. In any case, he was only drawing blanks when he tried to think of her.

A wiser soul than he would have taken this as a sign that maybe, just maybe, he should cut back on the drinks. Give away his bottle of jack, perhaps. But then he wouldn’t be Uzu Sanageyama, resident Fuck-Up bad boy of Akechi Incident-

(He hated the taste of whiskey, but he liked the way it burned when he swallowed the shot whole.)

It was a good thing Aikuro was driving, because Tsumugu was sure he was too shaky to properly handle the pedals. Still, when he glided into their parking space, Tsumugu had regained enough composure to grab his face and kiss him once, roughly. He could still taste himself on Aikuro's tongue.

He had to pull away before Aikuro decided he wanted to make good on his promise to fuck him until he screamed in the car rather than in a more appropriate venue.

Tsumugu was more than happy to kiss him like they were horny teenagers when they got to their floor, though. How much practice did it take to be able to unlock a door backwards, with one hand, while furiously making out, at that? (Aikuro was always full of surprises.) That question was irrelevant, however, in that moment. After all, he was already tugging off that stupid necktie when the back of his legs Aikuro the bed. And if Tsumugu thought he looked good between his thighs, he had to admit that that memory has competition with the way he looked with his shirt open, hair strewn against the sheets. God damn.

Tsumugu wondered momentarily if he'd break under his touch- despite their age gap, he was so slender, it made him feel burly and oafish in comparison. But the way he met his gaze said differently. Even as he pinned him down, thigh sliding between his legs to solidify his own position, he knew Aikuro was itching to tear him apart.

It was an incredible feeling.

His grasp came with the weight of two hundred pounds of honed muscle, biceps and abs that Aikuro had told him he could cut his teeth on, and it made it all the more satisfying when Aikuro hooked his knees around his waist and grinned like a cat with a mouse. Tsumugu's lips left wet prints on his skin as he traveled lower, sucking with intent to bruise. Aikuro's wrists were fragile and he knew he only let him pin him down because it suited his interests. Tsumugu's lips parted over his head when he pulled him free, and in a rare display of affection, pressed a kiss to it before taking him in his mouth.

The hiss that slipped through clenched teeth was worth the bitterness and salt, the weight of his cock heavy against his tongue.

Nimble fingers caressed his hair, almost lovingly. The gentle scratching against his scalp was so comforting, it almost made the momentary discomfort when he forced his own head down further worth it. Aikuro was always very gentle, generous enough that despite his distaste for oral, Tsumugu was willing.

Willing, able, eager, even.

He sucked away in silence for a while, and let Aikuro trace love poems through the soft hair he needed to buzz again.

"How was your day?"

Aikuro spoke, his usual cheerfulness only slightly stilted by the husky edge to his voice. Neither of them expected a response, but the friendly words kept the mood comfortable, as if he were a housewife asking her husband about his work. Tsumugu grunted nonverbally in response, and felt Aikuro's fingers stop and grip his mohawk tightly.

"I drove up here. It was nice weather, really. You guys were great. I think you're getting even better at riffing. You're incredible, you know that?"

Aikuro was always sappy when he was close and he was blowing him. Tsumugu suspected it was his way of being tender- rarely was he so sweet when they were fucking. Still, even if his kindness wasn't enough of a hint, the quaver to his voice was. He wasn't in the mood to swallow, so he pulled away, Aikuro's cock slicked with his precum and spit trailing from his mouth.

The older man pouted. "Mean."

"If you come now, it'll take you forever to get going again," Tsumugu pointed out flatly. "As much as I'd love to let you finish, I'd really like to come again."

"You're so *greedy,*" he muttered in response, but instead of complaining, he pulled himself back into a sitting position with his elbows. His cock bobbed in response to his movement, and Tsumugu bit his lip. Practiced fingers trailed up his leg to stroke at his balls. He was still excited, or so it seemed.

There were a lot of reasons he'd missed his boyfriend. The sex was one, of course- physical need always came to play whenever they were able to meet. After all, it was weeks in between meetings sometimes, because of all this traveling. It was only part of it, of course. Aikuro could be genuinely funny, charming, witty if a bit silly, cocksure, perhaps, but boldness was refreshing in a world where people looked at him timidly when they caught sight of his six foot frame and red mohawk.

They contrasted vividly, the deep blue of his hair bringing out the sparkle in his eyes like the red clashing against his skin. He liked it a lot.

And he liked the steadiness of his hands when they found his waist to pull him forward. Aikuro was a lot of things, and sometimes ridiculous was one of them.

He'd be damned if he wasn't also the best lay he'd ever had.

"You missed me," he half spoke, half sang in a lilting voice. Tsumugu resisted the urge to swallow when a finger brushed the tip of his erection, almost playfully pushing down hard enough to make it bob back up.

"Yeah, well," he managed. "So did you."

"Fair enough," Aikuro murmured thoughtfully, as if continuing a conversation neither of them could remember. "It's been a while."

His hand closed around him, all nerve, and Tsumugu twitched against his skin, Aikuro's palms sweaty but warm against him.

"Ah-"

He stroked, slowly. Aikuro was going too slowly for his tastes, but if he knew him, (and Tsumugu *knew Aikuro), this was only the beginning. Something small and plastic in his hand caught his attention, and he raised a forked eyebrow in his boyfriend's direction. He grinned in response and unclenched his fist to reveal the bottle of lube, like some exceptionally lewd magician.*

Of course, as always, when it came to Aikuro and his capacity to make sex a game, he was right on the money with his guesses. Tsumugu knocked his hand away and instead pulled the shirt draped over his shoulders down, ripping his own off over his head with precisely none of the teasing and class that Aikuro would have done it with. Tsumugu heard him sigh in disappointment, but he didn't stop Tsumugu when he laid back on his elbows and thrust his hips in the air to make taking his pants off easier for the both of them. The buckle of his belt clattered noisily to the floor, and then his ass was exposed to the chill of the early morning air.

There was little grace in the way he presented his posterior to his part time lover and full time personal idiot. He wasn't facing him, but he knew the face that that one sigh and click of his tongue was accompanying.

"Don't roll your eyes at me, jackass. I just wanna get off."

"You're romantic," Aikuro muttered in response. "But I can't say I'm adverse to doing the same."

"I did kinda leave you hanging, didn't I?"

Aikuro didn't respond verbally, instead choosing to press the pad of his thumb against his entrance, rubbing tiny circles. At least this time, he'd taken the precaution of letting the lube warm up against his skin, so when he shuddered, it was because he slid a finger in, and not because it was cold.

And he was definitely more eager to get the show on than he'd chided Tsumugu for, because it'd barely been two minutes before another finger pressed into him. He hoped, deep down, he wasn't making horribly embarrassing noises, but then Aikuro crooked his fingers, two knuckles deep inside him, and he felt his toes curl. The shrill whine he let out was almost blocked out by Aikuro snickering to himself.

"You really like that, huh?"

"Shut it, geezer," he managed to gasp back. "Don't get too arrogant."

"Hmm, I think I'm well entitled to be a little proud of myself," he murmured into his shoulder. The fingers pressed in deeper, and his hips moved of their own accord. Even Aikuro's delighted laughter at his obvious need couldn't drown out his moan this time.

Fuck it. It'd been too long since they'd been able to do this last, and he wanted him, wanted him bad. But pride was a stubborn thing, and he gripped the sheets instead.

Proud enough to refuse to beg, but not enough to feel ashamed of the way his ass was in the air? Tsumugu ignored the logic behind his decisions in lieu of arching his back further as Aikuro hit his sweet spot. He hissed through clenched teeth.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck-

Tsumugu set his jaw and dug his fingers deeper into the mattress. Like hell he was giving him the satisfaction of gripping onto him.

At least, not without a fight.

Still, he groaned, deep and guttural in his throat when he felt Aikuro withdraw his fingers. Something hot and hard slapped against the inside of his thighs, and he braced himself.

Instead of the expected fullness, however, he felt something rubbing against his crack, and rolled his eyes. "Aikuro."

"Hm? You say something?"

Tsumugu was getting a little tired of being jerked around. "Don't be such a damn tease. Put it in already."

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you," said Aikuro, rocking against him. "I guess you'll have to speak up."

"Aikuro."

"Louder." He felt him lower his body against his, the heat of skin against skin sensual in ways he was loath to admit, and a hand clenched around his cock. Tsumugu's knuckles whitened as he gripped the headboard instead for support.

"Fuck me already," he mumbled impatiently. "I'm not... ah-"

Aikuro's thumb rolled over his head, and he felt a bead of precum roll down, smeared by his hand. Tsumugu felt his lips curl into a smirk when he pressed his face into the bend at his shoulder.

"Say it nicer," he whispered.

The same pride that refused to let him beg earlier clammed him up again. "Don't be a shit, Aikuro."

"C'mooooooooon." Airy kisses trailed down his spine, falling just short of his ass. "Say please."

At this rate he was going to come before anything even happened. Well, he supposed he had more than enough time to hate himself later. He rolled onto his back, knees spread. "Fuck,

fine. Pretty please with sugar on top, fuck me in the ass."

He hoped the affectation he put on would be enough to goad him into complying, but nothing happened. His exasperated sigh was cut off by the drawn out noise spilling from Aikuro's lips.

"Weeeeeeeeeell-"

*"**Aikuro.**"*

He laughed, but at the same time, Tsumugu felt him lining himself up at his entrance, heavily slicked with lube.

"I'm just kidding," he whispered, and pushed into him.

Tsumugu let out a moan and involuntarily clenched up around him. If it weren't for the intimacy they'd fostered for so long, he'd be embarrassed beyond belief every time they had sex- Aikuro rarely missed an opportunity to gently tease him for how vocal he was, always. But today, he said nothing and rocked his hips back and forth, slowly, as if he were relishing the tiny whimpers that spilled from the back of his throat.

It wasn't like him at all to get emotional during sex, or even particularly needy, but yet he leaned into the kiss Aikuro pressed to his mouth, his tongue languidly slipping past his lips to touch his. Aikuro's hair fell into his face with the steady movement of his body, and Tsumugu pushed it back, half out of reflex, and half out of a desire to see how his face flushed with the stimulation of fucking him like this.

Aikuro was gorgeous, with the overhead lamp light framing the body he was so (rightfully) proud of, skin soft and supple. Even the stubble he'd evidently forgotten to shave off looked good on him. And his hair was silky and long, soft between his fingers. No matter how he pushed it back, though, it fell into his eyes. Somehow, it was worse like that, his eyes only half visible through the curtain of blue. When he could see them, between thrusts, they were hooded in a way that made Tsumugu bite the inside of his cheek.

He wasn't yet sure whether he preferred to look at him or kiss him.

Legs hooked around his hips, squeezing his waist with his knees. Maybe he really did miss him, because even with him inside him, he wanted more. Hands grabbed at his back, at his hips. The curve of Aikuro's ass fit nicely into his hands, and the older man laughed into his mouth at the surprise contact.

"Someone's a little possessive."

The breathlessness of Aikuro's voice came with a spare hand wrapping loosely around his cock, to jerk it with the barest of pressure. He bucked into his touch, driving him in deeper between his hips.

"Mmn," he replied, coherency gone. Eloquence had never been his strong suit, after all.

It showed when Aikuro's hips stilled, and then there was the godawful absence when he pulled out. Tsumugu knew he'd have hell to pay for making such a hideous whining noise, but

there was little more he craved than the dig of bodies against bodies. He didn't understand how Aikuro could be so composed besides the sweat beading in his clavicle, and the way his breathing was just a bit too heavy for casual conversation.

"You wanna finish, right?"

"God, don't tell me you wanna get fancy on me," he groaned, slapping an arm over his face. He didn't want to have to look him in the eye. "I'm not feeling it right now."

"Far from it. Flip over."

This, this he could do.

The sheets on this bed were really soft. He focused on the 300 count cotton sheets as Aikuro slid back into him with no resistance at all. Nice of him to get them such a nice hotel for them.

And of course it was easy to notice the quality sheets when his face kept bouncing against them. His wrists were in Aikuro's grasp, and he stretched back, muscles taut, pulling away from the mattress as his orgasm built up in his gut. It was such a pity he was about to ruin the fancy linen.

He could almost hear Aikuro thinking the same thing.

"Fuck," he hissed, and Tsumugu felt his arms drop to his sides. He threw an elbow out to steady himself before he faceplanted into the sheets. One hand steadied Aikuro against his posterior, the other wrapped around his cock and started stroking him, long and fast and increasingly erratic. If Aikuro was starting to go to pieces, he was crumbling apart entirely. It was a good thing his arms were free- he stifled a particularly embarrassing moan against his clenched fist, forearm digging into the mattress.

Toes curled, desperate to find purchase with every thrust into his body, he threw an arm out to brace himself against the headboard from the movement. Aikuro came with a jerk of his hips and groaned, low and dirty into the shell of his ear as he did. This contrasted spectacularly with the obscenely shrill whine Tsumugu let out in response, high and keening and desperate.

Kudos to Aikuro, he didn't laugh. The lube slickened fist around him didn't slow, and he ejaculated over the pristine hotel pillows with a grunt.

A heavy body slumped against him. There was no friction anymore, so the sweaty flesh touching his was stickier than it was intimate, but not entirely unpleasant. The familiar heat of his skin was always enough to put him to sleep.

"Don't fall asleep on me yet, Tsumugu."

"Huh?"

He turned his head awkwardly over his shoulder and cracked an eye open to find him smiling at him through the comforting fall of blue. At this angle, he could see the contour of his face

perfectly. He had to admit, Aikuro had a profile to kill for.

"If you pass out after we have sex, and don't even indulge me in pleasant conversation, I'll think you only want me for my body, you horndog." he pouted. "Talk to me about what's been going on, already."

Tsumugu glared at him through the narrow sliver of his vision. "I certainly don't date you for your common sense."

"Aw, that's mean, Tsumugu."

"Let me have this nap," he mumbled. "And don't call me a horndog when you haven't even pulled out yet."

Perhaps he realized the truth in his words, because he felt him withdraw with nothing more than a quiet slide of flesh against flesh. "C'mooooooooon."

"Ugh." He rolled onto his side to look directly into Aikuro's eyes. He'd draped himself over the mattress in a way he could only call catlike, although the outline of his body and the smoldering blue of his eyes suggested a regality that didn't suit the average house pet. Were he generous, or even at all inclined to give compliments, he might compare his boyfriend to a lion. The only problem with that statement was that Aikuro was too much of a pissbaby to compare to such a magnificient creature.

"Have you missed me lately? How about while you were on tour?""

"Can you really call two shows in California and then two months stuck in fucking Seattle a tour?"

"No, but you're not denying you missed me."

"You are like the inbred product of a one night stand between a spoiled persian and a peacock, you arrogant bastard," Tsumugu deadpanned. "You really need me to miss you to boost your own ego that badly?"

"I'm not hearing a no here."

(Sometimes, he really did wonder why he loved this idiot.)

"Maybe," he said, "but probably not as much as you did."

"Why do you say that?"

"You're the one that practically jumped my bones when you saw me."

This time, he was the one who got to smirk at him instead of it being the other way around. Aikuro pouted again, and he resisted the urge to remind him he was a thirty year old man, and not a petulant teenager. Before he could do so, the expression slid off his face to be replaced with his usual easy going grin, and he stretched, casually rolling over to sling an

arm around him as he did so. He'd bet every single penny he'd ever made that the fucker thought he was being smooth.

(Idiot.)

"Fair enough." The grin didn't fade, but his voice dropped back to a more serious tone. "Did the money I send help?"

"It covered the motel fees. It kept us afloat. You didn't have to do that, but we were all grateful. Even Ryuko, though she won't admit it to your face. But really, we would have been okay."

Aikuro scoffed at the suggestion. "Don't be proud. I wasn't about to let my own cousin and boyfriend starve, Tsumugu, much less leave them on the streets because their tour wasn't going that well."

"We wouldn't have starved."

"Well, probably not. At least I hope not. Maybe you would have gotten more gigs without my checks?"

"You're implying we would have gotten anywhere had Akechi Incident not saved our asses?" He paused for a moment before shuddering. "I can't believe I said that."

"Look, if you're ever in need for some extra employment, Nudist Beach could always use more models." He rolled his eyes at the incredible sound of disgust Tsumugu let out. "Oh, come on. We're not that bad."

"The edible panties, Aikuro."

"That was once, let it go already. And you'd be a great underwear model!"

Tsumugu glared at him through narrowed eyes. "Underwear modeling is one thing." He watched Aikuro wilt a little under his gaze. "But your skeevy lingerie line is staying away from me."

"You were wearing our boxers."

Shit.

He ignored Aikuro's self satisfied smile and rolled over onto his back. "Yeah, well, underwear is expensive, and free is free- stop smirking at me."

Aikuro chuckled to himself and planted a kiss on his arm, grabbing at his shoulders to pull himself closer. Tsumugu pressed his palm against Aikuro's face as he leaned in for a kiss, but felt lips on his hand and groaned inwardly.

"Why are you so clingy?"

“Because you’re really cute, Tsumugu,” he mumbled into his palm. “So tall. So scary. So ineffectually grumpy.”

“I’m not grumpy,” he countered gruffly. “I just don’t have the patience for all of your bullshit.”

“It is not bullshit, Tsumugu, it’s called having a sense of humor.”

“It’s just the way I am, and you keep trying to change that.”

“Well, why not? I’m sure you’ve got something inside of you that’ll allow you to unironically enjoy things without complaining about them. It’s called being genuine. You’re the one always complaining about posers, right?”

“I wish I had that amount of stupid unfounded optimism. You and Mako should get together more often, you’re two peas in a pod.”

“I’m sure she’d enjoy that. We could have a tea party. You’re invited, of course.”

He sighed deeply and let his eyelids drop closed.

“Tsumugu.”

“Mn?”

“I know your hormones are probably still raging-”

“Man, fuck off. Let me be tired.” Tsumugu curled up onto his side, but still, Aikuro followed him, resting his chin in the dip of his waist. “Aikuro.”

“You know, you remind me of this cat I saw on the internet just the other day. You wanna see?”

Tsumugu paused. He was always wary of anything Aikuro felt like showing him anything he’d found on the computer, but his eyes were sparkling so brightly he felt guilty. Against his better judgment, however, he nodded.

Aikuro’s eyes lit up immediately, and he lunged for his phone.

“On a scale of one to ten, how embarrassing is this?”

“You’re gonna love it.”

“Okay. So it’s a thirteen.” He furrowed his brow and leaned over Aikuro’s shoulder. “Alright, so, like-”

Aikuro stared at his to gauge his reaction. Tsumugu threw an arm over his face and groaned loudly.

“Are you fucking kidding me.”

“What do you think?”

(The pure, unadulterated excitement in his voice was incredibly endearing, and Tsumugu knew it wasn’t his fault he was old and didn’t understand. But still.)

“Grumpy cat? Really? Are you three?”

“Oh, come on! She’s cute! She's so cute! She looks like you!”

Tsumugu planted his face in both of his hands and let out a drawn-out groan of thinly-veiled disgust. “You sicken me. I’m dating a grandma. Next thing you know, you’re going to tell me that you’ve inherited a fortune from a Moroccan prince or showing me Cat Fail compilation videos on YouTube.”

“I’m thirty years old, Tsumugu. I’m not with it anymore.”

“Okay, Mr. Chain Letter.”

“You love me anyway,” he whispered, and Tsumugu couldn’t muster up the sufficient aggression to convincingly deny it.

“Shut up.”

He didn’t protest when Aikuro kissed him again.

Uzu saw her before she saw him, and it was obvious she was trying not to look lost or alone in the way she shrugged, hands deep in her pockets. Was she Nonon's type? The latter had certainly bragged about her enough.

Well, he hoped she didn’t fault him for trying to help her out here.

Patiently, he waited for her to notice him. There was a few seconds before they locked eyes, and he smiled as casually as he could. The hesitation on her face was understandable- no doubt she had to have some inkling of his reputation- but his intentions were pure.

Mostly, anyway.

Uzu cocked an eyebrow at the girl with the red streak in her hair and jerked his chin at the empty barstool next to him. “First three are on me. How’s that sound?”

There was a pause as his words registered with her, and the tension on her face dissipated. Ryuko smiled wryly and slid in next to him. “Sounds like I’d better make them count. What are you drinking?”

“Isn’t that supposed to be my line?”

“Whatever. How’s the bartender?”

Uzu chuckled. “They’re alright.”

“Fair enough.” Her next words were directed towards the bored twenty-something with the handlebar mustache. “Oi, Williamsburg. I’ll have a whiskey sour, on his tab.”

“You’re blunt.”

“I prefer direct," she said flatly. “Usually, I wouldn’t humor you, but you did get us this gig, and you were nice enough about inviting me.’

He snorted. “How is that not blunt?”

“Hey, I said prefer, not that I wasn’t blunt. Anyway, you gonna hit on me or what? You’ve got three drinks before I wander off. Woo me.” Ryuko leaned on her hand and looked at him patiently. “Thanks for the foot in the door, though. And the drinks.”

“Nah, it’s cool. I’m a fan. Never thought I’d actually meet you, though.” Her drink arrived in front of her, and he watched her toy with the garnish before taking a tiny sip. “You know, you've got-"

"Quite the bad reputation. I've heard. But I guess we have that much in common, right?"

"Fair enough."

The ice in her drink clinked against the sides of her glass as she raised it to her lips. "I'm still curious. Why us?"

He looked down at his own drink. Whiskey, from the bottle he'd bought, no ice. Nothing to water it down. "Contrasts."

"Hm?"

"We're Top 40. Nobody knows y'all. Yet. But you've got a good sound- I found you guys on some hipster's blog and they described Freshbloods as, and I quote, "The Runaways meets the Yeah Yeah Yeahs with a bad attitude and a complete lack of pretension". So I googled you guys because, I mean, with a description like that, how could I not give you guys a shot?"

"Huh." She drained the rest of her drink and sighed. “So am I more Karen O or Joan Jett?”

“Joan Jett, definitely.”

“*Nice.*” Ryuko waved down the barkeep and gestured at her the empty glass. “I’ll have a lemon drop this time. So that’s two drinks down.”

“You don't miss a beat," he muttered, pouring another shot’s worth into his glass. He wondered how many drinks he’d had so far. It wasn’t like he’d been keeping track.

“Time is money, and I like to get my money’s worth,” she stated matter of factly. “I kid, but I’m serious about stuff like that.”

“Huh.”

Despite his promises to Nonon, he let his eyes wander over the face of the woman sitting in the chair. She was definitely a looker- Nonon had good taste in that regard- but her hair was cut almost exactly like his. He was sure, however, that unlike his, her haircut was intentional, and not a product of laziness. Eyes settled on the red streak in her hair, and wandered south, but snapped back to his drink as she turned to face him, fingers tapping against the rim of her empty glass and a smile on her face.

“So.”

“So?”

“You’re Uzu Sanageyama.”

“That’s me. And you’re Ryuko Matoi?”

“Bingo.”

For all his usual methods of charming ladies, Uzu had never been particularly good at small talk, or at least when the end goal didn’t involve someone’s clothes on the floor and a fake number in the morning. At least not sober. He poured another shot into the glass he was holding and swallowed it rapidly. At this rate, he was going to be plastered by the time Nonon came back.

“So, like, tell me. How did you guys start the band?”

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid fucking question.

Luckily for him, the bartender set her drink down in front of her. He ignored the wink he sent him in his direction and waited for her to take a sip, fidgeting nervously. She raised an eyebrow and smirked in his direction.

“You really that interested?”

“Yeah, I mean. It’s gotta be an interesting story, right?”

Okay, so maybe he wasn’t entirely sober. He guessed he was starting to feel the whiskey, which would explain why his face felt warmer than usual and his tongue heavier.

Ryuko shifted in her seat and crossed her legs, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees.

“You ready to hear this from the beginning?”

He nodded.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Mako Mankanshoku, resident ray of sunshine, struggling under the weight of what was certainly too many jackets for someone of her size to be carrying. Before he could get to his feet to help her, another figure swooped in and pulled them free from her arms.

The android (Senketsu, he repeated mentally) was certainly a strange character. Ira wasn't quite sure what to make of him just yet. He seemed nice enough, but there was a scowl on his face every time he'd looked at him, and his eyes glowed yellow. His chest was flat, his skirts short, his hair falling into his face and generally unkempt, skin dark and, unless the lighting was deceiving him, vaguely tinted blue-grey. Moreover, there was a bright red streak in his hair, matching the one Matoi had, and he was currently trying to pry away a sukajan jacket from Mako's arms. As they approached, he caught snippets of their argument.

"Senketsu, I can do it myself-"

"If I can help in anyway, please let me assist you-"

"Senketsu, really, I'm not a baby anymore-"

He cleared his throat loudly. Both of them visibly started.

"Need some company? Or some help? Or, uh- whatever?"

Mako blinked.

"Yeah, sure," she said suddenly, and dropped every single jacket in her arms on to one of the spare seats. "Do you mind?"

"Nah, knock yourself out."

Senketsu shrugged and handed her the jacket he'd successfully pried from her grasp. "Take your beer, too."

"Oh, yeah, thanks!" She set the can he handed her on to the table before turning to Ira and grinning. "Do you want me to get you a drink?"

He opened his mouth to speak, before another, more familiar, less enthusiastically positive voice, cut through to his hippocampus and tapped straight into his fear reflex.

Ira knew from painful experience not to ask questions when all terrifying four feet, nine inches of pink hair and pent up aggression barrelled towards him. The five inch heels only added to her presence, but the effect was slightly ruined by the way her ankle bent at an awkward angle and she stumbled for a few steps. An unfortunate partygoer caught her by the elbow, only to be shoved away once she got her balance back.

He opened his mouth to ask, anyway, but Nonon was clearly not in the mood to answer anything that wasn't a yes or no question.

“Phone,” she demanded.

He hesitated for a moment. Nonon wobbled on her stilettos and stuck her hand out expectantly. “Did I fucking stutter?”

He turned to Mako and Senketsu, still awkwardly standing by the side of the table, and mouthed an apology before turning back to Nonon.

“Jakuzure, are you feeling alright?”

“I am just fuckin’ *peachy*, Toad,” she snapped. “I lost my phone and I need to talk to Satsuki, right now-”

“You don’t look too, uh-”

“I don’t look too *what*.”

There was genuine murder in her voice, and he wondered who’d pissed in her cheerios to get her as riled up as she was. “Have you been drinking?”

“Only two drinks. I can handle that much, I’m not you-”

They both paused and looked at each other, she in defeat, he in acknowledgment.

“Okay, so maybe I’m a little tipsy.”

Ira sighed.

“Just take it easy, alright?”

“If you’re not going to let me borrow your phone, can you at least call her for me?”

He shrugged and reached into his pocket. “What do I say?”

Nonon shrugged hard enough that she stumbled a few steps before shaking her head as if to clear it. “Tell her that I must have left the phone in the cab? And that I gotta get that back before I can really relax.”

“You know, the limo-”

“-is coming back at five, I fuckin’ know,” she grumbled. “Believe me, I’ve heard.”

The click of the buttons on Ira’s outdated Nokia beeped unpleasantly as she stood there in front of him, cross armed and clearly irritated.

“Will you ever get a new phone?”

“It works, I don’t think I could break this if I tried, and I definitely don’t need to worry about it getting stolen, unlike you,” he replied flatly. “Anyway, I’m just waiting for Satsuki to pick up, so you don’t have to worry about- oh, hello Satsuki.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. He ignored her in lieu of listening to the woman on the other side of the line.

“Ira?”

Ira cupped his hand around the receiver end to strain to listen to her through the pulsing club music. “I’m calling on Nonon’s behalf.”

“Why can’t she call me herself?”

“Lost her phone.”

Satsuki’s sigh was clear, even through the shitty static and the blaring EDM. “Limo?”

“Yeah, apparently. Can you call them to see if they have it there in the actual limo? I don’t have the number.”

“I’ll do that. You call her actual phone, see if the chauffeur has it. I don’t like to assume, but I’m guessing there’s sensitive material on the phone?”

Nonon looked up guiltily, as if she could sense the tone that Satsuki had, despite there being no way she could have possibly heard her through the music. He groaned and leaned forward to make sure she could hear him when he spoke.

“Nonon, are we right in assuming we really don’t want that phone in the paparazzi’s hands?”

“You assume right,” she muttered. “This could be a public relations disaster on the ape’s level if we don’t tip the driver nicely.”

“Damn.”

“I’ll take care of things,” Satsuki said crisply. “In the meantime, Gamagoori, I entrust you with making sure everyone comes back in one piece and mostly unscathed. Especially Uzu.”

Ira nodded vigorously, before remembering she couldn’t see him. “No problem. I won’t take my eyes off of him.”

“You’re not doing that great of a job,” Nonon interjected. “He’s off drinking with Matoi.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you trying to woo her? Leaving her near him seems a bit counterproductive. Not your brightest moment, Jakuzure.”

“I will plant my face in her ass by time the night is over, you don’t worry about me. Worry about the sleepy underachiever with the nice rack instead- oh, come on, you know I’m right,” she snapped in response to his scowl. “Oh, and keeping the monkey from catching every STI in this club like a demented, sex addicted dream catcher. Good luck with that, by the way.”

“Wh-”

Ignoring his spluttering, she plowed on. “And don’t you try to play the innocent card, either. If I was making goo-goo eyes at Matoi, you were… fuck, okay, so maybe I’m a bit too tipsy to think of a good analogy, here, but don’t you fucking try and tell me you don’t think she’s cute.”

“Go hit on Matoi and leave me be, she's right there,” he grumbled. “And go easy on the liquor, it goes straight through you.”

“I’ll be fine.”

His voice dropped an octave, something that was an incredible feat, considering his baritone. “Remember Vancouver.”

It was incredible how quickly her face flushed red. Alcohol or no alcohol, there was no mistaking the scarlet of her cheeks, not even with the flashing lights.

“I trusted you,” she hissed. “And it was four years ago, anyway. You don’t get to remind me of that-”

“It’s just a warning,” he smirked. “Don’t get too carried away.”

Nonon looked dead into his eyes and picked up the can of beer Mako had left on the table. Neither of them broke eye contact as she popped open the tab and drained the entire thing in three gulps.

“I do what I want,” Nonon whispered threateningly, and crushed the can in her hand. “Have fun with your, ah, friend, froggy.”

This would have been significantly more intimidating were he not almost three feet taller than her, but she glared daggers at him before turning on her heel.

Part of him felt like stopping her, but she almost tripped on the jacket draped over Mako’s chair and threw an arm out to steady herself. Pride was clearly not going to allow her to accept any sort of help.

“Careful,” he called out after her. “Not to imply you’re a lightweight, or anything, but we don’t all have Uzu’s liver.”

He could have sworn he heard her mumble something filthy under her breath, but a cheerful voice caught his attention. Thoughts about bad decisions in Canada and alcohol tolerances vanished, to be replaced with warm smiles and pretty people with pixie cuts.

“You know, I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t this.”

The two struck a strange silhouette. Senketsu stood slender and tall, Mako curvy and petite. His hair fell back into a tiny ponytail, hers only just touched the back of her neck.

“It’s like watching a comedy routine,” she whispered. “He’s so big. She’s so short. I wonder what they’re talking about.”

They watched the two bicker back and forth, swaying to the beat of their argument like Rock’em Sock’em robots.

“Do you think we should grab Ryuko and run while we still can?” he asked her. “I’m not sure I trust them.”

“Y’know, for someone who disagrees so much with Tsumugu, you sure are channeling him hardcore right now.”

He rolled his eyes. “I just don’t know about this. They’re… weird.”

Mako put her hand on his forearm and took a deep breath. “Senketsu, I don’t know how to tell you this, but you're kind of an android. I don’t think you’re allowed to call anyone weird.”

“You know what I mean,” he snapped. “They’re rockstars. I bet they only eat, like, yellow m&ms.”

“I like yellow m&m’s.”

“Everyone likes m&m’s. That’s not the point here.”

“You mean the fact that we left Ryuko with that one, right?” She jerked a thumb in the general direction of the bar. “He seems nice.”

“You were the one who spent the entire goddamn afternoon reading aloud all of his TMZ stories. I don’t trust anyone that the Luxor Hotel has a restraining order against.”

“How do you even *do* that?”

“Do you think the big guy will tell us?”

They looked at Ira. He was wincing under the death glare of what looked like the world’s biggest, angriest chihuahua. Mako grimaced.

“No way. He looks like too much of a weenie. Probably under lawyer's instructions to not say anything.” She muttered. "We need a better plan."

“We could get him drunk.”

“That’s mean, Senketsu. Let's try asking. He looks nice enough."

Senketsu sighed, and looked at his wrist. His expression clouded.

“Senketsu?”

“It’s nothing, don’t worry about it.” His eyes narrowed anyway, pupils contracting under the neon glare of his battery life indicator. “I just don’t have that much battery left. It’s fine though, I still have a good twenty minutes before I have to start worrying.”

“Alright, if you say so,” she sighed. “Do you think they have food? I want a snack.”

She was sure Uzu Sanageyama was a good kid, if not in practice, then at least at heart. His gaze had not gone down past her jaw, and even as he looked into her eyes, she could tell he was also more than a little tipsy, but genuinely interested. They caught her attention- his eyes were cloudy grey and a little hooded, but he was smiling.

Her own eyes trailed over to the bottle his spare hand was tapping. It was still pretty full, but if the rumors Mako had been feeding her all day were true, it wouldn’t stay that way for very long. She frowned momentarily.

But his liver wasn’t her business, she decided.

“Okay, if we’re gonna tell this story, I should start by explaining that, like, I’ve known Senketsu and Mako the longest, I guess.”

“Senketsu’s the, uh, dude in a skirt, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Just tryin’ to make sure I got everyone straight before you continue.”

Ryuko uncrossed her legs and stretched out lazily before clearing her throat. “Are you really sure you want to hear this?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I am. You guys just came out of nowhere, so I was curious.”

She hesitated visibly and tapped her fingers against her chin before picking up her drink. “It actually started at a bar.”

“A bar?”

“So a year and a half ago I was in college, right, and there was this show that I really wanted to see, and they were playing at a bar. So, Mako and I went, because that’s what you do, y’know? I had a crush on their drummer, and my cousin was there, so I showed up, and-”

“Wait.” He shook his head. “You were in college?”

“Yeah. I was a double major.”

“You can do that? Shit, I didn’t even graduate from high school. What did you study?”

She grinned. “Developmental psychology and accounting. With a minor in gender studies.”

“Holy shit.”

“What, didn’t have me pegged for the type?”

He squinted suspiciously in her direction. Ryuko smiled innocently in response.

“Anyway,” he said, “so what happened?”

She took a long sip from her drink. “So, it turns out they sucked live.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“And their drummer was significantly less cute and more of an asshole in person than I thought he’d be. Especially drunk.”

“Again, sorry.”

“But,” she continued, “luckily, I wasn’t the only person who was sick of his shit. He made a crack at their roadie, and apparently he wasn’t having it that night, because he sucker-punched this dick right in the fuckin’ face.”

“And?”

“Well, we got kicked outta that bar, but I was determined to buy this guy a drink, so we went to another bar. And then another. And by the fourth one, I’d found out he played the guitar too, and he was out of a job, and I was like, ‘You know what’d be totally cool? We should, like, start a band or something.”

“And then what happened?”

“Well, Mako still had her drivers’ license back then, so we woke up three states away with a really nasty hangover and we were out of gas, and turns out this roadie is dating my fucking cousin. So I check my phone, and my cousin, has left me like, seven really worried voicemails, and apparently somewhere along the line I called my school and told them I was dropping out to become ‘bigger than Eddie Van Halen’, and also to tell my sociology professor to kiss my ass for giving me a B-minus. So I wasn’t about to go back there.”

“Are you fucking serious? That’s-”

“It’s okay, I couldn’t afford grad school anyway, I was a scholarship student. But wait, it gets better.” She finished off her drink and put the lemon peel garnish in her mouth, without flinching. “So, Mako was sober the entire night, right? She doesn’t drink- no, wait, that’s not exactly right. She doesn’t get drunk.”

“Wait, what?”

Ryuko pushed her glass silently towards the bartender. “I have never in my entire life seen her so much as tipsy, and I’ve known her since I was seventeen.”

“But-”

“Never. Ever. I think she’s straight-up immune to alcohol. Or, at least, it doesn’t do anything to her- I’ve seen her get into drinking contests with bikers. I used to hustle pool a lot, in the early days, and she did that. But that's not relevant right now. So, I wake up, still kind of drunk, and she tells me she called up our parents-”

“‘Our’?”

“My parents are dead. Her parents were my de-facto legal guardians, for a while. It’s a long story- she’s like a sister to me now.”

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I.. I…” He shoved his face into his drink hard enough to slosh whiskey into his nose. Ryuko bit back the impulse to laugh and took a sip from her drink.

Thank god for alcohol.

“Don’t sweat it. I didn’t really like my dad, and my mom died when I was a baby. But anyway, she told me that she called up our parents and they told us they’d handle our lease on our apartment, and that they wished us the best of luck.”

“That’s kind of...”

“Eh, the Mankanshokus are funny that way. They didn’t really care that we’d run away with a strange man in the middle of the night to become rockstars. Our mom was more worried about whether or not we were eating properly.”

“And I’m gonna guess that the weird guitarist was the ripped mohawk dude, right?”

“Ding ding ding. Now, pony up your stories. You have one more drink left, and here I am. Now, entertain me.”

He groaned loudly into his glass, much to her amusement. “I was high as a kite. It was only a few hours ago and I'm already sick of it. Am I ever gonna hear the end of that?”

“I don’t care what people say. It’s a classic.”

“I’m glad someone agrees with me.”

“Although," she went on, "to be honest, you strike me as the type that unironically likes Wonderwall, so.”

Uzu looked like he couldn’t help but laugh at that. His glass was almost empty, and he poured a generous measure of whiskey into it again as he spoke. “You said I had one more drink, right?”

The bartender handed Ryuko a second lemon drop. She grinned again.

“You’ve got a whole bottle there, though. We can talk for a bit longer.”

He looked uncertainly at the tiny figure sitting next to him at the comically undersized round table once Nonon vanished from sight. She looked like nothing more like a living coat rack, balancing two jackets, a backpack, and a plate full of pigs in a blanket in one hand, a drink in the other, topped off with a cartoonishly huge grin. Ira wasn't quite sure what to make of her. Cute, definitely, but she was odd, to say the least. Six years of Akechi Incident had greatly desensitized him to confusing, strange people, and confusing, strange situations, but he was still wary as he shuffled his seat closer.

Still, he leaned down to her ear, and spoke anyway.

“Not your scene?"

She startled. Had she not put her drink down first, she would no doubt have splashed an unsuspecting dancer. Be that as it was, she did manage to knock half of her food onto the floor. He groaned, inaudible over the heavy bass of the fiftieth identical dance song that night, and stooped to pick up her plate-

-only to knock heads under the table.

“Ow," she complained, rubbing her head vigorously. "Watch it, hulk."

Her tone wasn't harsh, despite her words. Still, It was a good thing it was dark- she couldn't see the way his face flushed furiously. Their heads were only inches away from each other.

Luckily, as Tsumugu had pointed out earlier, Mankanshoku wasn't about to win any prizes for attentiveness any time soon.

“Do you want me to grab you some more hor d'oeuvres?" He tried weakly. She looked at him blankly and shrugged.

“Whatever floats your boat. I just wanna eat. I haven't gotten a chance to, with the concert and all." Mako paused before giving him a million-megawatt smile that momentarily blinded him. "Thanks for that, by the way."

“S'no problem. It was Uzu's idea, anyway," he muttered, and immediately regretted.

“Uzu? Is he that guy at the bar?"

They both turned forty five degrees to crane their necks in the direction of Sanageyama. He was slouching in his seat, his face in one hand, a glass in the other, with a girl sitting next to him. Ira sighed under his breath.

“Yeah, that's him."

Mako put a finger against her cheek and hummed to herself under her breath. "He looks like a tool."

“Good." Ira deadpanned. "He's an awful influence. Stay away from him if you don't want to be a casualty- although, at this point, a better word would be statistic."

She wrinkled her nose. "I read in an interview that you guys were best friends."

“Oh, no, we are. He’s just a fuckup.”

“Harsh.”

Ira shrugged. His size gave the impression of a mountain rippling. “It is what it is. He’s not a bad guy, I'd just say that he’s lost his way." He looked at Mako, who raised an eyebrow at him. “What is it?”

“That’s so tacky. You sound like a Lifetime movie.”

“What do you have against Lifetime movies?” He wondered if she could hear the hurt in his voice.

“Nothing! I like them. Tsumugu and Ryuko make fun of me for it, though. They say they’re too dramatic.”

Ira leaned in and looked around conspiratorially. “What did you think of Cyberbully?”

“I loved it,” she said. There was nothing in her face that suggested anything but the truth. “Tsumugu and Ryuko laughed their butts off, though. I thought it was sad.”

He stared at her for a moment, before leaning back in his seat with a sigh. Her brow furrowed.

“Are you gonna laugh at me too?”

“No.” A genuine smile crossed his face. “I loved it too.”

They both gazed at each other for a long moment, and he swore he felt his heart skip a beat. His lips parted, dry and cracked, and he realized how badly he needed a drink of water. His throat was parched.

Slowly, ever so slowly, her hand reached out towards his. He swallowed thickly and looked straight into her eyes. She was completely serious.

A very small hand touched his, and he blinked. When he looked back into her eyes, there was a sudden fierceness in them.

“Do you want to share my weenie dogs?”

It was obvious Ryuko had had more than three drinks by the time she found her at the bar, wobbling as she tried to stay upright on her seat.

That was okay with Nonon, but to be fair, lot of things were okay with Nonon at the moment. Had her heels always been this tall?

“I thought I said,” she managed, “you had a three drink limit.”

Uzu turned to face her blearily. He wasn’t looking too hot either, she realized, but she could care less about his exposed collarbones and thick hair (and the way sweat had plastered it to his face) and more about what he was doing slumping against Ryuko. Ryuko winked at her and unwrapped a stick of gum. For some reason, she shivered when she popped it into her mouth.

“Sharing is caring,” he said, lifting the empty bottle of Jack. “We just got a lil’ carried away, is all.”

“Right.”

Ryuko swayed particularly hard to the left, and Nonon grabbed her wrist to make sure she didn’t fall off the stool.

“My hero,” she drawled, grabbing onto the bar for balance. “You ready to rock?”

Nonon wondered if it was really okay to pick up someone as obviously plastered as Ryuko was before she slid off the seat and bodily slammed into her. She swore under her breath and felt her ankles buckle beneath her.

“Whoa there. Hold on to me.”

Ryuko was heavier than she looked, especially with her arm slung over her shoulders. It certainly didn’t help that she was over half a foot taller, and reeked of whiskey. Nonon shot a glare back at Uzu, but he was too busy pouring himself another drink. She was certain that bottle had been significantly less empty last time she’d been here.

That wasn’t her concern at the moment, though. They stumbled through the crowds together, arms clutching at each other as they tried to stay upright.

“Yo, Nonon.”

She cracked an eye open and peered at Ryuko, her breath hot against her neck.”What is it?”

“I really, really gotta pee.”

“Oh, fuck.” She looked around for a moment. “Uh, we’ll get you to the bathroom, okay?”

“Thanks,” she mumbled. “You’re the real MVP, y’know that?”

Nonon didn't respond. Instead, she elbowed her way through the crowds of people laughing, drinks in hand. "'scuze me, pardon me- shit, there it is." Neon lights peeked out through the general populace, beckoning them forwards.

It took a few false tries, but Nonon managed to get the bathroom door open by throwing her weight against it, shoulder first. Ryuko grumbled something halfway coherent and let go, making her way towards the handicapped bathroom stall as fast as she could. The door slammed, and the sound of the bolt sliding closed hadn't finished echoing around the room before Nonon heard the unmistakable sigh and accompanying spraying sounds of someone who had had much too much to drink.

She ambled over in front of the door awkwardly, hoping she wasn't shaking as much as she feared she was.

"You doing alright in there?"

"Yeah," came the faint reply. "I just really had to go. I've been drinking the fancy sparkling water all evening."

"I'm uh, glad you're feeling better."

"Back up, okay? I'm gonna open the door, and it would suck if I totally knocked you into the next zip code by opening the door too fast."

"What kind of dumbass wou- *OW*."

Maybe she should have paid attention, because the door cracked into the side of her face. This time, she wasn't able to keep her balance, and the floor rushed up to meet her. Knees buckled and she spat out a few choice words, hands stinging.

"Oh, fuck, I'm sorry," Ryuko muttered, peeking out behind out of the bathroom stall. "I'd offer you a hand, but, uh, you know."

"Yeah, alright, I'll just go fuck myself," she grumbled under her breath. "No, get your gross hands away from me," she added, smacking away the hand Ryuko offered anyway. "I'm okay."

"Alright, if you say so."

"Go wash your hands," Nonon retorted. "*Please* don't touch me with those filthy paws."

(She hoped the fact that she was scrambling to get up off the floor in her nightmarishly tall platform heels didn't take away from her threatening countenance.)

Ryuko shrugged. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught her standing by the sink, waiting expectantly. Her feet finally decided to stop sliding around on the tile floor, and she pulled herself up, huffing for breath. Maybe it was time to cut back on the cigarettes.

"Look. I'm not gross, my hands are clean," Ryuko said, matter of factly. Nonon squinted at the soapy fists she thrust in her face. "You wash your hands too. who knows what this

bathroom floor has seen?”

“Christ, give me some credit.”

Ryuko scoffed and ran her hands under the automatic stream of water. She glared and mirrored her actions, squeezing the soap pump into her palm. “Why are you so snarky all the time? Who hurt you?”

“It’s just the way I am.”

“Abrasive as hell?”

“Well, you seem to like it, so why should I change?”

It wasn’t until the words were out of her mouth that she realized. The stream of water was the loudest thing in the room as she rinsed her hands. The smirk on Ryuko’s face spoke a thousand words.

“You’re totally into me.”

“You’re the one who left your number in my pocket.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the one who invited me to this party.”

“You tried to kiss me-”

Nonon felt the tiles of the wall press against her back, and she realized they’d been inching closer for a while. A curious look crossed Ryuko’s face as she leaned in close.

“Can we just stop beating around the bush and make out already?”

They stared at each other for a long moment, faces so close Nonon could almost taste the gum on her breath. Her heart stuttered awkwardly in her chest, pulse twitching under the skin of her throat. Her eyes trailed down Ryuko’s body, and she felt her do the same.

They locked eyes, and she nodded.

“Oh, fuck it,” Ryuko muttered, and pressed her mouth sloppily to hers.

Everything sucked, and he hated whiskey.

Uzu glared blearily at the 750 mL bottle in his hand. The amber liquid was more than halfway gone, and he hadn’t even been here for two hours. Ira wouldn’t be too happy with him.

It was stupid. Everything was stupid.

“Thanks for evurythin'," he slurred out. “You've been reaaaaally supportive, mistur."

The barkeep stared at him. “All you’ve done for the past hour is ask me to hand you the pretzels. Be safe."

“Thank you, mistur prezzel man. You have a good night.”

He slid off his stool and stumbled a few steps. Apparently, fifteen consecutive shots of whiskey made it difficult to walk straight. Who knew?

The bottle in his hand was sweaty from his palms, but he clutched it like a lifeline. He wanted so badly to dance with somebody, but as he made his way through the couples grinding on each other on the dance floor, he remembered his promise to Ira.

'No fuckin’ around,' Ira told him.

Uzu wondered if this applied to actual fucking. Unfortunately, he had the feeling it did.

He needed a cigarette and some fresh air. Slowly, he made his way along the side of the wall, blindly feeling his way towards the exit. He mumbled an excuse to the bouncer as he squeezed his way out, and made his way towards the stretch of concrete where he could sit with his feet over the edge of the curb.

With his feet planted firmly against the ground, he almost felt human again. The early morning chill seeped in through his shirt, and for a moment he wished he hadn’t left his heavy jacket at the hotel.

It didn’t matter. He pulled the familiar box of Camels out of his pocket and fumbled around for the lighter he kept in the inside of his jacket. The silk against his knuckles felt comforting, as did the familiar burn of tobacco smoke.

God, he felt lonely.

If he wasn’t allowed to pick anyone up, or go off with anyone, he should at least be allowed to talk to someone, right? Maybe- no, wait, Nonon had that hot girl (Ryuko?) he’d been talking to. Ira was busy, Shiro and Houka were definitely getting busy, and he didn’t remember how to put names to faces on most of his contact list.

That left one person. He scrolled down until he hit ‘S’ on the list of names, and hers had a gold star next to it. Very briefly, before hitting the ‘call’ button, he wondered how much he would regret this in the morning.

It didn’t matter.

The phone rung twice, two perfect rings before he heard the familiar crispness of Satsuki Kiryuin’s voice.

“Uzu, I swear, if you’ve gotten yourself kidnapped again-”

“First off, that was, like, once. Secon' of all, the groupies were very nice t’me. Can’ I jus' talk?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. “How much have you been drinking?”

“Enough that I got the balls t’call you, but not enough t’think I won’t regret this later. Indulge me. ‘M lonely.”

If he had though the pause was long, her sigh felt even longer. “You woke me up.”

“You’re a light sleeper.”

“Touche.”

“I mean, if you’re like, tired ‘r whatever, you should sleep. I mean, I don’ wanna annoy you.”

“It’s fine, Uzu. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I dunno.” He paused. “Uh, did everythin’... work out with Nonon?”

There was another pause. “Are you that worried?”

“I mean, like, it’d suck if everyone saw her titties.”

There was thinly-concealed amusement in Satsuki’s voice when she responded. “Would it really?”

He paused in confusement. “What’d’you mean?”

“Oh, never mind. My humor is wasted on the drunk.”

"Well, I'm pretty wasted."

Satsuki groaned audibly. "Well, we haven't found Nonon's phone. It's probably turned off, or has a dead battery, but it'll be unfortunate if her photos leak."

"I gotta take a leak. Will I get arrested if I piss on the sidewalk?"

"Yes." Satsuki sounded exhausted. "You've been arrested twice for that alone, Uzu. Don't do that. Go to a bathroom."

“Aight, aight, mom.”

For at least the third time in the last two minutes, Satsuki sighed deeply. “I don’t want you doing anything stupid, okay? Just don’t drink anymore. Go pee in a bathroom. Don’t make any trouble for Ira.”

“But y’guys haven’t found Nonon’s phone?”

“No, Uzu. I just said so.”

“S’like… can’t the nerd jus’ wipe it?”

“It’s a Friday night. Do you really think I can get ahold of him?”

“True.”

“If you’re that worried about her, maybe you should worry more about *not* ending up plastered all over the cover of US Weekly. Stay out of trouble, Uzu, I swear.”

“Y’all always say that as if I’m gonna- I’dunno- fuck somethin’ up again.”

There was a pregnant pause. “Do you mean to imply you don’t?”

“Well…”

She sighed. “Uzu, I’m tired. I’m going back to sleep. If you want to talk to someone, I’m sure Ira would be glad to speak to you.”

“But-”

“Goodnight, Uzu.”

The line went dead. He stared blankly at his phone, until a searing pain brought his attention to his spare hand. He looked down in confusion until he realized he was still holding the burning filter of his cigarette. Uzu dropped the ashen remains, swearing under his breath.

“*Fuck*.” His boot ground what was left of the Camel into the asphalt of the street, and took a good look at the remainder of the jack in the bottle.

After only a few moments of deliberation, he brought the bottle to his lips and took a long swig. Then, with only a hint of remorse, he poured the remainder of it over the burn. The stinging was only somewhat assuaged by the liquor, but he managed to get back on to his feet. There were three things he needed to do, and all three of them required the use of a bathroom.

"If you eat so quickly you'll choke," he said, hoping the worry he felt didn't translate as condescending concern.

Mako stopped halfway through her plate to stick her tongue out at him. "I've totally eaten more than this, so I won't. Second, what could you even do to help me? No offense," she added quickly.

"You're a very a blunt girl," he muttered.

She shrugged cheerfully. "I just say what's on my mind. And I'm not a girl."

Way to go, dumbass, his brain chided him. God, his face could have reheated the pigs in blankets.

"I'm so sorry-"

A tiny hand on his lips cut him off. He wondered if she could feel how hot his skin was.

"Sh."

Mako shook her head sagely at his discomfort and dunked another weenie into the spicy mustard with her spare hand.

"It's okay. I just figured, since we'll probably be touring together, I might as well clear this up." The hot dog disappeared into her mouth and she chewed for a good ten seconds before she propped her face against the palm of her hand and looked him dead in the face. "She and her are fine with me, but I'm not a girl."

Awkwardness bloomed in the pit of his stomach. "So, uh-"

She made a vague non-committal hand gesture with her left hand. "I guess not a girl isn't completely right. I am? I'm not? I'm other things too."

"Right," he said, and it made sense, really, for the small figure in front of him. "I get it. I think."

"Was that a surprise to you? I'm sorry." Her cheerful tone faltered momentarily. "You just seemed nice enough to tell the truth. You look like the listening type. Also, you're kinda upright. Lil' too serious. But that's not necessarily a bad thing, y'know, being serious."

"It isn't?"

"You took me seriously," she said, and it felt like a badge of honor, the way she stated it like an unshakeable truth. "People don't do that a lot. Maybe it's because I'm small."

"Well-"

"And it's okay to be unsure! But don't guess stuff. Unless it's that I won't eat something, because then you're totally wrong."

He wondered if she could hear the sheepishness in his voice. "Alright."

“Anyway, so like, before we were interrupted, we were talking about how it would suck if I were to choke on these weenie dogs. Hypothetically, at least, because I hope you’re a nice guy and not like, an axe murderer, and therefore choking to death is a much more likely way to die around you-” -she punctuated her sentence with a wave of her toothpick- “and I would totally kick the bucket because there’s no way you could save me from my frankfurter death destiny.”

Relief washed over him, but he ignored it in lieu of arguing back. "And *that* is where you would be wrong. My mother was a nurse. I know basic first aid, CPR- the Heimlich is under

there too."

"Your mom was a nurse?"

Genuine interest colored her words. It seemed like a surprising thing to get excited about, really.

"Yeah, she was. What about it?"

"So's mine!"

Mako looked like she was about to bounce out of her seat in excitement. A smile crept up on his face against his will.

"That's an interesting coincidence."

"Nah, not really. I bet there are tons of nurses that are moms."

"Well, maybe not that part, but the fact that both of our mothers worked in medicine is interesting."

If he had thought she looked excited before, now he was scared she was going to vibrate out of her seat.

"Mako, are you okay?"

She nodded vigorously. "I'm just really excited!"

Yeah, no kidding. Ira squinted nervously at her. Excessive enthusiasm wasn't something he was a stranger to (he thought of Uzu,) but it was in his nature to worry anyway.

"Excited?"

"Yeah!" She drummed her fingers on the table rapidly before looking up at him. "My dad used to run a clinic, before the accident."

"The accident?" He wondered what he'd gotten himself into. "What do you mean 'the accident'?"

Mako leaned in conspiratorially. Before he'd realized it, he was craning in close to hear what she had to say. "We're not legally at liberty to say."

"Uh."

"All you need to know," she whispered, "is that our friends managed to shmooze my mom a doctor's license in my dad's stead. We operate under the same name though, so it's almost as if nothing had changed."

"What do you mean, 'friends'?"

"Just some of our best customers. Family friends, y'know?"

“Wh-”

“Y’know, *family friends*. We don’t write the police reports, the Family protects us. Simple.”

Ira was at a loss for words. “When you say ‘family’, do you mean ...” he trailed off under the surprising ferocity of her glare.

“You ask a lot of questions, dude. I wouldn’t’ve pegged you for the type.”

“Did your dad lose his-”

“No more questions about me. Tell me about your mom.”

He blinked. Nothing about this conversation had gone anything like he’d expected it to.

“Like I said, my mom’s a nurse.”

“What about your dad?”

Maybe she caught the way his face darkened, because she pursed her lips and shook her head. “Sorry, never mind. That was rude of me.”

“Nah, it’s okay. My dad’s not around. My mom raised me on her own.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s alright. You didn’t know. My uncle was around a lot, though, so he’s kind of like my dad.”

His eyes trailed over to the beer can in Mako’s hand, and he was struck with the thought that it would be really nice to have a drink right about now. He was starting to regret the car.

“You okay?”

Ira looked up. Mako was leaning forward in her chair, waving a hand in front of his eyes. “You kind of drifted off for a minute, I think. If you want, we can talk about something different?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, sure.” He cleared his throat awkwardly and hoped that the lighting in the room would hide the way his face reddened slightly. “Uh, I’ve been meaning to ask you- how did you choose the drums? I mean, uh, why the drums? I mean, uh-”

“Dude, chill.”

God, if he hadn’t been blushing before, he was a hundred percent certain he had to be red in the face by now. “Sorry, I’m not really good at small talk.”

Mako smiled reassuringly. “It’s okay. Neither am I. Tsumugu calls me a broken record when he’s in a bad mood and a chatterbox when he isn’t.”

“Is he the guy with the mohawk and the weirdly fluorescent blue boyfriend?”

“That’s Aikuro. He’s our sponsor.”

“You guys have a sponsor?” Ira reached for his can of ginger ale. “I thought you lived off of ad revenue.”

“Yeah, he paid for our hotel. Have you ever heard of ‘Nudist Beach’?”

He had had the misfortune of drinking while she spoke. Ginger ale bubbled up his nose as he coughed. Faintly, through his coughs, he could hear a chair scraping. Tears pricked at his eyes, but he managed to crack one open far enough to see Mako Mankanshoku leaning in close enough to touch his face.

Were he not sure he was choking to death, he might have been able to appreciate how pretty her eyes were. Unfortunately, it was pretty hard to enjoy the proximity of Mako Mankanshoku and her admittedly pretty eyes between wheezing gasps for breath.

“Yo, Ira. Ira? Are you okay?”

He tried to smile in confirmation, but he was almost completely certain that it came out looking more like a pained grimace. This did not seem to placate her in any way.

“Just stay still, okay! I know CPU too!”

This was probably the least reassuring thing he could have possibly heard. Quickly, he extended a hand to catch her face before it got any closer to his. “I’m… okay…”

Mako didn’t look very convinced. Maybe it was the fact that he was trying to speak between hideous coughs. “I’ll go get you some water, okay?”

Ira tried to choke out a protest, but it was too late. Mako had disappeared off into the crowds, almost skipping with excitement. He groaned under his breath and rubbed his temples.

“Wow.”

Too late, he remembered they weren’t alone. The dark-haired figure sitting in the corner by the pile of jackets had stayed silent the entire time, and was so dark he’d almost literally blended into the wallpaper. His eyes, however, glowed inhumanely yellow, and the perfect pearly white of his teeth glinted in the dim light, bared very clearly in what Ira knew was unmistakably a smile.

“Really wouldn’t have *pegged* you for one of Aikuro’s customers myself, either.”

“Oh, shut up,” Ira snapped. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough. You are really obvious, y’know. I don’t know if it’s all humans, but the bunch I tend to associate with must really lack subtlety.”

“You have a sensor for subtlety?”

“Are you going to ask me if I know how to love next?”

“Sorry.”

The android cast him a knowing look as he pulled back out of his seat. “Anyway, I have to go charge my battery. And yes, before you ask, a regular outlet should work fine.”

Ira nodded sheepishly as his figure disappeared into the crowd. In his sudden lack of company, he realized just how cartoonishly small the table was in comparison to himself. Luckily, he didn’t have to wait long. He heard her before he saw her, now-familiar bubbly high-pitched voice parting the crowd with good-natured ‘excuse me’’s. He cleared his throat and tried to look as normal as possible when she handed him a bottle of water.

“You doin’ good?”

“Yeah,” he said, and hoped to God that this time it sounded normal. “Sorry for making you go all the way-”

“It was no trouble at all!” she chirped. “I’m glad you’re not dead!”

“Thanks.”

“So, do you prefer the latex or the leather line?”

He groaned loudly.

He settled back into his seat with a self-satisfied grin on his face. Done.

“Did you find her phone?”

“Yes, but we shouldn’t have any problems with it. It was a piece of cake. The driver actually called me to report the phone had been left behind. The battery’s dead, so they’re just holding it now. And I actually keep an encryption on that one, so even if they do manage to get in, they’re not going to find anything worth selling. This is boring.”

The figure reclining in bed sighed. “Who’d interest you? Matoi?”

“You know, Ryuko Matoi doesn’t have much data on her.”

“Of course you’d be interested in the data.”

Houka pushed his glasses up his nose and glanced away from his laptop briefly. “Her internet presence is the only thing that’s particularly remarkable about her, besides her guitar riffs and incredible ability to attract negative attention and fights, really. I’d like to see her give Sanageyama a run for his money.”

Shiro made a noise in the back of his throat. “I wouldn’t put money on that.”

“Fair enough. I’m not a gambling man, but I wouldn’t bet against the house either.”

“Nicely said.”

Houka barked out a short laugh and pulled a simple t-shirt on, bare and unadorned but for two four-letter words emblazoned in white against his chest. It wasn’t all that cold, either, but cooling sweat had the nasty side effect of making him chillier than he wanted.

Of course, he’d sooner bite his own tongue off than tell Shiro to slow down during sex. Instead of entertaining stupid thoughts like those, he turned back to his laptop to cheerfully continue reading the wikipedia page of their opening band. Unfortunately, there was little information to glean that he hadn’t already found out through some other means, despite the date informing him that the last edit had been made only a few hours ago.

“Whoever wrote this page should be taken out back and shot,” he muttered to himself. “It reads like a log of internet celebrities they’ve managed to have feuds with. Nothing on their early lives, no real information on the android either, which is a real shame-”

“Have you checked their social media yet?” Shiro called from the bed. “The android’s got a blog.”

“Yes, I know, agender-android. Fascinating stuff to be found in their FAQ, especially about themselves, but they mostly repost their instagram photos and write short updates. I read the entire blog pre-show.”

“Nice.”

“Isn’t it?” He reached for the glass by the side of his laptop and took a long sip. "Hm. Exquisite."

Houka Inumuta was a lot of things. Big on partying was not one of them. Still, he savored the vintage he'd had brought up to their room.

"Don't be a dick, Houka," Shiro called out irritably. "You've only legally been able to drink for two years. When did you become a wine connoisseur?"

"This is a nice Merlot, though." He turned to face the fair-haired figure handcuffed to the headboard, mostly unclothed. "Californian. Fruity notes. Let me enjoy this."

Shiro rolled his eyes so hard, Houka was mildly concerned. "Why are you so stereotypically *gay?* Wine? *Really?*"

"Are you complaining?"

Shiro looked up at his wrists and scoffed. "Guess not. But come back and kiss me, already. And please fucking uncuff me, my fingers are going numb.”

“Alright, alright.”

With a sigh that was only half real, he scraped his seat back and walked the few feet to the king-sized bed his boyfriend was currently adorning, along with most of their clothes. He leaned over him with the key, balancing his wineglass in his other hand. There were two muted clicks and Shiro rubbed his wrists absentmindedly as he pulled free.

“You want a drink?”

“What the hell,” Shiro sighed to himself and ran a hand through his hair, still slightly damp from sweat. “I could use it.”

Houka poured the deep red liquid into another glass. Neither looked at the other when he extended his hand, instead trusting each other not to spill the wine all over the white sheets (which, although not quite pristine after their romp, were definitely still pure Egyptian cotton with some ridiculous thread count. Satsuki didn’t skimp on hotels for them). Warm fingers closed over his as the glass switched hands.

Shiro had beautiful hands, as befitting of a (admittedly, former) pianist. And he looked damn good with a wineglass in his hand, the red contrasting vividly with pale skin and golden curls falling over his shoulders. He was so uptight about letting his hair out of his ponytail in public that seeing him loosely framed by a halo of hair was always a treat, even if he usually only got to see it post-coitus.

Houka allowed himself one self-indulgent pan over Shiro’s body. Slim hips, still flushed from where they’d rutted furiously, skin slapping against skin. Shoulders, only partially obscured by the white, crumpled shirt he’d neglected to fully remove. Slender limbs, almost ghostlike and bloodless, skin so thin it was almost transparent. His veins always stood out underneath, blue and purple like the dark circles under his eyes. He always complained about his forehead, but the rest of his features were clean and sharp and beautiful- handsome wasn’t the word for someone like him.

Shiro was the most beautiful man he’d ever met, lips plush, tinted red from his kisses and also the wine. His eyes burned gold, and his eyelashes were long enough to make Nonon jealous, and there was something almost feminine about his entire countenance. Even his face was free of any sort of stubble. If it weren’t for the fact that he watched him shave every single morning, he’d question if he could even grow a beard.

Someone like him seemed to transcend gender in the way, like one of Bernini’s angels. Shiro deserved to be carved from marble, really.

But he’d be damned if he was about to give up his pleasures of the flesh.

“Houka.”

He started. “Hm?”

“You’re staring at me.”

“Just admiring how hot you are,” he whispered, leaning forward to kiss him. Shiro’s eyes once again rolled back into their sockets, but he obliged, pressing his mouth to his for just

long enough that Houka caught the taste of the grapes on his tongue.

“I know I’m pretty, I don’t need you to tell me that.”

“Arrogant, aren’t we?”

He scoffed. “I’m quoting you word for word, from when you said that last week. And as you said yourself-”

“-It’s confidence in knowing what you are, I know, I kid. You’re gorgeous. So am I. We look good together. And anyway, it’d be churlish to say we weren’t incredibly stunning, really.”

“Okay, now you’re pushing it.”

“Bite me.”

This time, Shiro ignored him, and rubbed his thumb rhythmically against the veins on his forearm.

There was something about the set of his jaw that was picking at the back of Houka’s mind, and he couldn’t quite figure it out. It wasn’t post concert stress- he was pretty sure they’d taken care of that while Shiro had been handcuffed to the headboard. It could be a lack of sleep, something easily remedied once Houka crawled in next to him under the covers. The permanent wrinkle was still there between his eyebrows, eyes narrowed as he glared at the wall. It could just be emotional exhaustion, but it felt deeper than that.

So he did as any scientist worth his salt did, and employed the time honored hypothetic-deductive method.

Question: Why is my boyfriend so distant today?

Silently, he gauged his subject of study. Before he could get too distracted by the mathematically perfect slope of his forehead, however, he looked at his hands, tapping absently at the now-empty glass of wine he’d drunk much too fast to fully enjoy.

Hypothesis- Shiro’s hiding something.

Houka leaned against Shiro, head pressing against the side of his own so that his bangs slid into his eyes.

Nothing.

He pressed a kiss to Shiro’s cheek, who grudgingly allowed the gesture, albeit with a subtle tensing of his muscles under his touch. His face fell. He tried again, this time against his jaw (variables be damned, even he was genre savvy enough to know logic fell by the wayside on the battlefield of love and complex emotions), and felt the same thing happen.

“You’re touchy-feely today.”

Shiro's words were without any true venom, and yet they felt like a cold swallow of water. But what sort of man of learning would he be if he gave up now? He took the arm Shiro kept stroking absently and brought it to his lips.

"Mn-hmn." Houka pressed a kiss to reddenned wrists, though he knew without looking up Shiro was making a face. "You don't like my affections?"

"You scare me when you get sappy," Shiro stated bluntly. "It doesn't suit you."

He looked up. True to form, Shiro looked like he was stuck halfway between disgust and appreciation.

"Well, maybe you deserve it for putting up with my experimentation today," he said placidly, leaning back on his hands. "I know you're much shyer than I am when it comes to sex."

Shiro rolled his eyes for what had to have been the twentieth time that evening. Houka wondered if they were on track to set some sort of world record.

"I'm not *shy*, Houka, and I'm not too fond of the implication that I'm some sort of prude."

"Yeah, no, I guess it's hard to call you that after you told me to-"

"Don't push it," he warned him.

Houka smirked at his boyfriend. "You just lack a sense of adventure. Not that what you do is bad or anything- you're good at what you do, and I appreciate it. It's just that I just sense that lately you've been holding back, for some reason." Concern crept into his voice despite his attempts at maintaining his patented classic cool aura. If there was one thing he wasn't good at, it was being easily genuine. "Is there anything you need to talk about?"

If his worry showed through, Shiro didn't mention it. "I'm fine, Houka."

"I mean, I just want you to know you're the best boyfriend I could ask for, really, and that I appreciate you going out on a limb for me. Should've photographed your face when I asked you if we could try fucking in the limo, it was blood oran-"

A tiny smile threatened to break out on his lips before he stopped himself and rubbed his temples instead. "Shut the fuck up."

"But-"

"Women- ah, cis women, at least, see more colors than men do. She wasn't wrong about it being blood orange. Christ, I just wanna clarify that."

"You're touchy," Houka muttered. "I just meant to say you're a good man, Shiro, if not the best at hiding your embarrassment."

There was no way he was imagining things, he definitely noticed the way Shiro's jaw clenched halfway through his sentence. For an instant, he wondered if he'd yell, but the moment passed and his shoulders loosened up.

“Hell, I’ll fuck you wherever, whenever, however. I just understand the difference between being a good sport and completely shameless. There’s a line, y’know?”

“You’re dodging the question, Shiro.”

“Just pour me another glass of wine, okay? I’ve had a long day.”

A frown crossed his face, but he turned away to keep him from seeing the way his expression darkened. The sound of the wine sloshing against the glass was the only thing that made a sound in the room. He handed it to Shiro without a word.

It was a good merlot, really, as pretentious as it sounded, yet Shiro didn’t take the time to savor it at all, draining the glass in a single gulp.

“Shiro, really, whatever it is, we can talk-”

Shiro Iori did not exactly have a reputation for being able to hold his alcohol, but he knew it was something nastier than the wine that made him press his mouth against his to silence him. Houka knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that something was wrong, even if he wouldn’t tell him. He also knew it was wrong to kiss him back when there was so much he needed to ask him, knew it was an evasive maneuver away from some conversation he didn’t want to have- whatever the fuck it was- and that he needed to pull away right now.

But Shiro Iori was the most beautiful man he’d ever met, and a damn good kisser to boot. Shiro was kissing him, and pulling off the shirt he’d just put on, and Houka was (despite his fondness for the electronic, and his fascination with androids and the people that they associated with) only human, after all.

So much for that conclusion.

“Excuse me, pardon me, coming through-"

Senketsu elbowed his way through throngs of gyrating bodies, pulsing like the music against each other. Darkness threatened at the edges of his vision, but the glowing end of the tunnel shone past the dancing figures.

The holy grail, an oasis amongst the nauseatingly loud music, his sanctuary. He pressed a hand against the door, then leaned in with his shoulder, cracking the heavy door labeled "Men's" open with his remaining battery life.

The smell of piss and bile assaulted his sensors, but he didn't have time to recoil. Robotic eyes scanned the walls before they found what he had so desperately seeked out.

Senketsu undid the wristwatch on his left wrist, revealing the tiny seam where his artificial skin joined. Quickly, clawed fingers pulled away the convincing dark flesh away from his

metal frame.

Fitted flush into his body was a plug that he pulled free, ignoring the discomfort of wire unrolling from inside him. Blindly, he felt around with his charger in hand until he found what he was looking for.

The jolt of electricity ran down his spine as he managed to plug himself in, and a uncharacteristic sigh of relief escaped him. The music outside faltered momentarily as every single lightbulb in the establishment flickered. He slumped, exhausted, against the wall.

Figures, he thought bitterly. The only place in the whole fucking club with available outlets was the bathroom. No consideration for him, as usual.

It served him right for forgetting to charge earlier, but in the rush of excitement, he'd neglected to do so. At least he'd remembered to scout out somewhere to recharge before his batteries died again. It would be... Inconvenient, at the very least, if he were to power down in the middle of a club.

Still, he couldn't help but beat himself up. Here he was, on the floor of a bathroom, stone cold sober, stuck until he was sure he wasn't going to die out halfway through something important. And bathrooms weren't particularly pretty or interesting, just quiet and not quite sterile. There was no ambience with the club music loudly pounding through the door, only vaguely muted by the walls. His head clinked against the tiles as he let it slip back in defeat. Fun.

Senketsu wasn't quite sure how long he'd sat there before one of the doors to the bathroom stalls swung open uncertainly. A tall man with shaggy hair stumbled out, reeking of liquor and bad decisions. He watched impassively as the poor schmuck managed to find the nearest sink, fumbled for the tap, and managed to turn it on before he heaved. The water splattering into the sink managed to camouflage the sound of sick, but Senketsu still pursed his lips in distaste. It was a good time to be grateful he couldn't smell or taste like a human could. The tiny receptors in his nose couldn’t quite translate the sensation into data he could fully process, but it was still unpleasant, and he wrinkled his nose out of reflex anyway.

It was this idiot’s fault for drinking too much, he knew, and yet he watched silently. The man's shoulders shook as he vomited, and something akin to pity bloomed in his emotional processing circuits. Were he human, he was sure he'd have felt it where his stomach was supposed to be.

Mystery Drunk splashed ice cold water onto his face and shook his head furiously, as if to clear his mind. Against his better judgment, Senketsu called out.

"You okay there?"

Blearily, the drunk turned to him, and immediate regret hit him. Uzu Sanageyama looked confused to find himself addressed with any form of concern, and by extension, compassion. It seemed to be in short supply around him, something that Senketsu suspected was less because of his friends and more to do with his antics.

Like drunkenly throwing up in a club bathroom at three in the morning.

"'M fine," he finally responded, rubbing at his eye. "Jus' drank a bit... Too much..."

And that would have been the end of that, except that, drunk or not, Senketsu was rather distinctive looking, and difficult to miss. Uzu's brows furrowed in confusion, and then his eyes, large already, widened in recognition.

It really showcased how bloodshot they were.

"You're that human lookin' robot," he shouted, much too loudly for the small room and evidently very excited. "With Freshbloods, right?"

Compassion flew out the window.

"I'm an android, not a robot, thank you very much."

His eyes stayed focused on his face, which contorted into a childish frown. "No offense, dude, but whats the difference?"

Maybe it was because he was tired and this guy was obviously very out of it, but he screwed his eyes shut and sighed. "Sit down."

"Huh?"

"You're in no shape to keep drinking and I can't exactly get up and go out with you. Sit down."

Sanageyama wobbled on his feet as he hesitated. "Well-"

"Ryuko's off somewhere, anyway. She isn't out there for you to awkwardly hit on."

That seemed to settle it for him. He plopped down next to him in a tangle of limbs, beaming at him. Senketsu was still unsure what he'd done to deserve a grin like that, and warily looked at him as he slouched against the tiles.

"Aight, I'll bite. What's the difference?"

Senketsu sighed and absent-mindedly tugged at the cord still plugging him into the wall. "Androids are hybrids. We look human, mostly, but large parts of our innards are robotic. We're an unholy mix of organic material grown around computers. Some of us are more sentient than others- oi, are you even paying attention?" He was busy twirling a stray piece of hair around his finger, and looked a little embarrassed at being caught.

"Hm? Oh yeah, no, don't worry, I am," Uzu responded hurriedly. "So like, ‘s it offensive t’ call you a robot?"

"I'm a person, not a roomba."

"Sorry for calling you that, then."

"It's okay."

A loud banging noise from the adjacent bathroom rang through the room, and they both started.

“Y’think they’re okay?” Sanageyama asked curiously.

Senketsu shrugged. “Whoever’s in there’ll be fine. Probably one of your groupies found someone less drunk to mess around with.”

“Rude.”

Sanageyama belched loudly and Senketsu looked at his wrist. He was only at forty percent. How much longer would he be stuck in here?

He missed Ryuko. He wondered where she was. He hoped she was having fun, at least.

She could taste the cinnamon on her tongue. There was a lot of tongue involved in kissing Ryuko Matoi, partly because Ryuko was quite drunk, and partly because Ryuko was pretty good at kissing. Nonon thought so, at least.

All things considered, she probably wasn't the greatest judge of things at the moment, seeing as she herself was pretty drunk.

It suited her a lot, though, she decided. She might start chewing Big Red too.

Her mouth moved south of her mouth, and she kissed her neck instead. Reflex caused her elbow to ram into the wall of the bathroom stall. The echo hurt her head.

“Careful,” Ryuko grunted. “I’m not about to get caught rutting in the ladies’ bathroom of this place.”

“You’re the one who pulled me in here,” she hissed back. “Don’t complain.”

They’d spent half the time between kisses bickering about the atmosphere, and the other half trying to map each other’s mouths. If she was right, Ryuko had two fillings.

Ryuko’s hand had been wandering lower and lower down her hip, but it was just then she felt it cup her ass in full, caressing it for a moment before giving it a squeeze. The black satin of her dress rode up her hip, and she hummed in approval, fingers digging into her flesh. This was nice, but Nonon wasn’t particularly known for her patience, and Ryuko made a surprised noise in the back of her mouth when she felt a hand pulling up at her crop top. Still, Nonon couldn’t help but flush at the way her breasts bounced in the bustier she’d picked out for her. And of course, she was lucid enough to notice.

“You like tits better?” Ryuko asked breathlessly. “I’m really more into asses, honestly-”

“Of course you would, you goddamn barbarian,” Nonon managed between the kisses Ryuko planted on her neck. “Ass people are always savages. Savages who’re into fucking in bathroom stalls.”

“Mn, but you’re not complaining, are you?”

She had a point there.

“And besides, that’s why I chose the handicapped stall. Because by the end of the night, you won’t be able to w-”

“Shut the fuck up and kiss me instead,” Nonon gasped out. “Seriously. That’s offensive.”

Ryuko blinked a few times.

“Sorry.”

(Again with the cinnamon. She could get used to this.)

She cupped a breast with the hand that wasn’t curled around Ryuko’s neck, pulling her forward. They were significantly larger than hers, something she was always fascinated by. The novelty of a boob in her hand that wasn’t hers was always nice, but hers looked so, so good, especially with the nipples poking through the thin fabric. She rubbed her thumb around one experimentally, and was rewarded with a quiet moan into her mouth.

“Hey, let me try,” Ryuko whispered, and suddenly she felt her breasts exposed to the open air.

“Wait-”

“You have them pierced?” Ryuko poked a nipple with an expression she could only call fascination. “That’s hot.”

She opened her mouth to complain, but words trailed off when a wet tongue pressed against her nipple and she whined against her will.

“Sensitive?”

“Shut up,” she gasped. “It’s not my fault. Blame the piercings.”

“Are you sensitive anywhere else?” Her mouth moved up to kiss her collarbone, but at the same time, fingers hooked under the skirt of her dress and tugged up. Ryuko squeezed her ass before working her fingers down between her thighs. Fingers brushed lightly by her hood, and she shivered violently.

“Wow. I didn’t think you’d be the type to go commando.” She punctuated her sentence with a nip at her earlobe. Goosebumps peppered her skin as she rubbed small circles around her clit. “I’m digging it.”

“I’m just not into panty lines, can you blame me?” Her words came out breathier than she’d wanted, something that was endlessly embarrassing. In retaliation, she pulled her top down far enough that her breasts spilled out. Ryuko groaned.

“Don’t stretch my shirt out.”

Nonon ignored her in lieu of pressing her mouth against a nipple. She squeaked in response, but let her unbutton the front of her shorts. Fingers worked their way into her panties, and she smiled in satisfaction when Ryuko jerked her hips forward into her touch.

“You call me sensitive?” She teased, curling her fingers in. “Christ. How long have you been thinking of me?”

“Long enough.” Her voice caught on the last syllable, and she bucked, groaning. “Fuck.”

“You’re fucking soaking, holy shit,”

She smirked and crooked her fingers, eliciting a gasp from Ryuko, who grabbed onto her arms for purchase. “Go easy on me, seriously.”

“Wait, you’re not seriously going to come from that, are you?”

“N-no, I’m not…”

Ryuko’s voice was shaking already, which didn’t give her words much credibility. Her thumb rubbed against her, and her voice keened. Nonon watched in fascination as she shook, eyes glazing over, and moaned, pulsing around her fingers. Nails dug into the bare skin of her shoulders, trembling from the overstimulation of the hands that wouldn’t stop moving until she squeezed tightly. “That’s enough.”

“*Wow.*”

It took Ryuko a minute to catch her breath and speak again as Nonon pulled her fingers out from her shorts, squinting at how pruney they were.

“Sorry, it’s been a while… and I’m an especially shitty lay when I’m drunk.”

“No kidding. Shit, you were faster than a fifteen year old boy.” She tilted her head in fascination.”You think you can ride out a second one?”

She shook her head. “I think I’m good. Hey, are you clean?”

“Huh? Uh, I’m pretty sure, but uh, I haven’t exactly been monogamous, so, uh-”

“‘t’s cool.” She pulled a square packet from her back pocket, still breathing heavily. “I’m nothing if not resourceful.”

“A rubber?”

“Well, only if you’re not willing to get creative.” She caught the edge of the foil with her teeth and pulled, only grimacing slightly. “Do you have a latex allergy?”

“No, thank god.”

“Alright.” Ryuko unrolled the condom over her fingers, giggling. “Shit, I hope I don’t rip this in half-”

The latex tore awkwardly at a jagged line, producing a makeshift dental dam. Nonon raised an eyebrow at Ryuko, who looked proud of her work.

“You’re truly a visionary.”

“Necessity is the mother of invention, and I’m desperate.” She sat back on her heels, kneeling on the floor. “Okay, make this easier for me.”

Nonon leaned back, knees spread. “You- *ah*-”

There was a moment of silence where the only noise in the entire room was the sound of Nonon’s nails scratching against the toilet paper dispenser as she tried to find something solid to hold onto. The only other available thing was Ryuko’s head, and she hummed, pleased, when she tugged at her hair. Fingers dug into her thighs as Ryuko tried to position the dam at a better angle, and Nonon whined in the back of her throat when she pulled away.

“You know,” Ryuko began, “I really never thought I’d get off to the taste of cough syrup.”

This caught her off guard.

“You… what?”

“This,” she said, lifting up the pitifully torn condom, “is cherry flavored, and it tastes like absolute *shit* as a result. And it’s not like latex is exactly prime eating material to begin with.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, you were doing so good, too.”

Ryuko snorted. It shouldn’t have been an attractive look for her. “What, are you going to tell me something, like, ‘your mouth is only good for one thing’ or some cliche femdom line like that?”

“No, shithead, I meant you’re good at this,” Nonon hissed. “Please don’t quit on me halfway.”

She barked out a short laugh in response.

“All you had to say was please, princess,” she said, and dove back in between her thighs. Nonon’s hand immediately tugged at her hair again, breathing heavily through her mouth.

Neither of them could be absolutely sure how long it’d been before an unpleasant buzzing noise caught her attention. At the very least, it was long enough that she was starting to feel the heat build up in her core, legs trembling as they tensed in preparation for release.

Nonon blinked. The sound was coming from Ryuko's jacket pocket. They both pulled away, Nonon's knees shaking more than ever.

"I have an idea."

Ryuko's voice sounded like her jaw was starting to hurt, but there was a gleam in her eye that meant that whatever her idea was, it was something she could get behind.

"What is it?" she asked, and she hated herself for how her voice shook. The effect was not lost on Ryuko, who grinned wider in response.

"It's an unknown number, which means it's probably your friend, Ira. The bulky one, right?"

"Is it a 646?"

"Yep."

"It's Ira."

Ryuko handed the phone over to Nonon, a grin on her face. It took her a few seconds to catch the implications behind it, and her face flushed.

"Oh my god."

"Just tell him I'm in the bathroom, and that we'll meet up with them later, or whatever. It'll be hot."

"But-"

Ryuko settled back between Nonon's legs, and she raised the phone to her ear, trembling.

"Matoi?"

"No, it's me." She hoped to god her voice wasn't as shaky as she felt. "She's in the bathroom, I'm holding her jacket."

"Oh, great, I was hoping to get ahold of you. Everything okay?" His voice dropped to a whisper. "How's everything between you and her?"

"Great. Fantastic, even." Nonon coughed loudly. "How did it go with Pixie Cut?"

"Oh, it's going pretty well, I think. She went to go get some snacks-"

"That's awesome. Glad to hear your methods of seduction are working out so well for you."

He sighed deeply. "As opposed to what, exactly?"

"Why are you calling me, Ira?"

"Well, it's really late. I'm rounding up everyone who wants to go home now. I'm driving."

“Right. How could I forget the Barbiemobile?”

Ira ignored her crack. “Are you coming along or not? Mankanshoku wants to know about Matoi, as well, so if you could ask her-”

“Don’t worry about us.”

Ryuko pulled away for long enough that she caught her winking, before rolling her eyes at Nonon’s frantic gestures to go back to what she was doing.

“How will you get home, then?”

Ira’s voice sounded genuinely concerned, but Ryuko’s mouth suctioned over her clit and she gasped sharply, tugging upwards and freeing hairs from her scalp.

“Nonon?”

Fuck, she wasn’t going to be able to hold out for much longer. “Sorry. Stubbed my toe.”

“Will you take the taxi when it arrives?” The concern was melting into suspicion, and the pants she was having an increasingly difficult time suppressing weren’t helping at all.

“Will my phone be there?”

“Yes, it should be-”

That was it. She was going to-

“Then we’ll take the limo back,” she managed, before ending the call.

They sat through one of the more awkward silences Senketsu had ever had the displeasure of tolerating. Throughout the entire thing, he watched the cycle of Sanageyama’s eyes drooping shut, head falling forward, and then snapping back with a hypnic jerk. It was mesmerizing, almost. Were he human, it would probably help calm any anxiety he was feeling.

Unfortunately, he was very much not. He stared at the drunken bassist sliding towards him under his own drunken weight until his head leaned against Senketsu’s shoulder and he could almost taste his breath. He resisted the urge to gag.

“Why are you leaning on me?” He asked cautiously. Sanageyama was heavy. If he decided to pass out on top of him, he’d have to wait until he was at least fifty percent charged to try lifting him off of him (he’d have to see about trying to switch out his battery for one that allowed him to run on fuel again as a backup). And god forbid Uzu’s stomach betray him again, he wasn’t in the mood to clean bile off of himself.

The door swung open, and a few bars of In Tokyo filled the room. A drunken couple stumbled in, hands in each others pants, only to break apart, red faced and on uneasy footing, when he cleared his throat loudly. The music echoed off the tiles even as the door closed behind them, and Uzu opened his eyes blearily to look him directly in the face.

“Do you have any parti-particular preferences?” He slurred, draping a heavy arm around his shoulder. “Has anyone at least told you you look really human? You’re also softer than I thought you’d be.”

“Huh?”

Confusion set in as he dragged his body into Senketsu’s lap. Frantically, he tried to keep himself from displaying any emotion at all. It could dissuade him, maybe? If he was lucky, at least.

His legs were warm, and softer than his- human flesh would always surpass his in that sense, at least- and they were straddling his. It wasn’t altogether unpleasant, but his programing was screaming at him that it was definitely a little weird. He was very, very close to him now.

Clammy hands grabbed either side of his head, and synthetic neurons fired off, his entire countenance shifting to one of extreme disgust as he leaned in, eyes shut, mouth puckered. His eyes detected drool.

“Do *not* touch me.”

His hand caught the side of Uzu’s face before he managed to plant a sloppy kiss on his mouth, and he pushed. The other man winced and slid back, groaning.

“You can’t possibly horny enough to try and fuck a robot,” he managed, still slightly shaken up from the suddenness of his movements.

“I thought you said you weren’t a robot, though,” Uzu sounded genuinely confused now. “Which one is it?”

“It’s an expression. I can say that. You call me that, I’ll kick your lights out.”

“I‘m curious,” he groaned. “And I like sex. It’s comforting. I need some body heat, I need some love.”

“You won’t die because you go a night without getting laid,” Senketsu deadpanned. “Might do you some good, actually.”

“I jus’ want to love people,” he whined. As he spoke, he leaned heavily onto his shoulder.“Is it that you’re not into dudes? Or just not feeling it? ‘m sorry either way, I should have asked-”

“I’m not into anyone, at any time, and anyway, I wasn’t built for sex,” Senketsu managed, with Uzu’s weight on his shoulder causing him to slide down onto the floor. His skirt was starting to ride up. “There’s literally nothing there. I was built for Ryuko by her father, and he didn’t make me capable of intercourse or sexual desire. Believe it or not, not everyone wants or needs to fuck.”

“No, I get that.”

“Huh?” For whatever reason, Uzu Sanageyama had not struck him as the type to understand or particularly care about the finer details of sexual attraction or lack thereof. “Really?”

“Yeah, dude. I got friends like that. I get it, ‘s cool. Sorry, bruh.”

Senketsu stared. “Color me impressed.”

“Why does everyone expect me not t’get things?”

“Uh.”

“I get love. I love lot’sa people!” he sighed dreamily. “And it’s okay if you don’t love people. I jus’ love a lot of people.”

“Right.” Senketsu stared at his wrist in desperation. He was still under fifty percent. “So, uh, anyone in particular?”

Uzu looked like he was thinking very hard. “Well, uh, I love m’dog. I love Ira. I love Kurt Cobain. I love my mom. I love my band. I love my bass-”

“No, but I mean- are you dating anyone?”

“What are you, a reporter?” He squinted and looked around the bathroom suspiciously. “Satsuki said ‘m not s’posed to answer this unless she said so.”

“Are you dating Satsuki?”

“Nah, but her mom really likes me. ’s really weird.”

“Right.” Senketsu repeated. “So, uh, what do you know about the pink-haired girl? The one who disappeared off with Ryuko?”

He had been programmed to recognize millions of subtle shifts in the human face, but it wouldn’t have taken the state-of-the-art coding Dr. Matoi had written to notice how Sanageyama’s expression dropped like a rock.

“She’s… cool. So’s Ryuko. Why’re you asking?”

It was time to backtrack. “Oh, nothing, really. I just wanted to know that she was okay. I’m kind of protective of Ryuko. Part of the reason I exist is to make sure she is alright.”

“So y’really love her?”

Senketsu rolled his eyes. “Just because I don’t experience romantic attraction doesn’t mean I can’t love people.”

“No, I get it, I get it. S’cool, s’cool.” He paused. “D’you kiss people?”

“No-”

“You should kiss th’people you love,” Uzu continued seriously. “There’s’a lot of people I wanna kiss. I wanna kiss all my friends. I… I have kissed most of m’friends.”

“That’s cool…”

Uzu nodded vigorously. “Friendship is cool. Holding hands ‘s cool. Cuddling with your friends ‘s cool. I love m’friends.”

He wasn’t quite sure how to break this to him. Luckily for them both, a muffled noise rang out.

“Do you hear something buzzing?” he asked Uzu. Blank eyes met his, and the taller man shrugged. Really, he was sure Uzu Sanageyama was a perfectly chill guy when he wasn’t a drunken emotional wreck, but right now, he was clinging to him again, and he had neither the energy nor the heart to push him off.

The muffled buzzing didn’t fade, and he pointed at Uzu’s jacket. “I think it’s your phone.”

“Hm? Shit, that’s probably Ira asking me where the hell I am,” he groaned, reaching into his pocket.

-I CAN’T EVEN LIE, FUCK BETTER WHEN I’M DRANKIN’,
RIDE DICK LIKE A PRO, THROW THE PUSSY LIKE I’M FAMOUS-

“Are you *shitting* me.” He scrambled to his feet, wire pulling free from the wall. Sixty percent. He should be good for the rest of the night.

Uzu ignored his whispers and pulled the offending rectangle out of his pocket. “Yo.”

Senketsu watched as he mumbled into the phone. “Uh huh. Yeah. Yeah, no. No, no, ‘m good. Yeah, yeah, I‘ll be out in a minute.” Uzu turned to face him. “Help me up.”

Senketsu groaned loudly, but offered his hand anyway.

“Ira! Hey, Ira!”

“Huh?”

He turned to face a staggering Uzu Sanageyama, slung across the shoulders of the very clearly irritated android Mako had called… Senketsu?

In any case, he sighed and stretched his arms out to receive him. Part of him was afraid he’d stumble over someone’s foot and break his nose, but there was also a part of him that needed to alleviate the poor android’s obvious exasperation.

Instead of leaning on him, though, strong hands caught him by the lapels and hauled his face towards his. Their foreheads clacked together, and he sighed and looked Uzu straight in the eye. They were bloodshot, with bags underneath that clearly pointed to a need to sleep. The shorter man laughed, and the taste of whiskey and bile made him crinkle up his nose.

“You need to sleep,” he said. The exhaustion in his voice was probably obvious to everyone within earshot but him, who grinned wildly and grabbed either side of his face, ruffling his hair. Ira sighed as the (usually) neatly combed back platinum blonde locks fell out of place and into his eyes.

“Bro,” Uzu slurred. “Like, you know you’re my bro, right, Ira? We’ll fuckin’... we’re fucking bros, man. Ride ‘n’ die and all that... Have I told you how much I love you, lately?”

“Yes,” he said, patience waning quickly. “Many times, in the van, while I was icing your face after I slapped you this morning.”

“Oh yeah… I forgive you for that, though, I was-” He hiccupped. Ira flinched. “I was way outta line, sorry ‘bout that…”

“Uzu, you are *clearly* very drunk,”

“‘m just, just a lil- little tipsy, that’s all, really,”

“I’ll drive you back to the hotel so you can sleep.” He looked over his shoulder to the slim figure currently stroking a sleepy Mako’s hair. “Thank you for entertaining him and keeping him from running off. I was supposed to keep and eye on him, but, uh,” He cleared his throat. “I got distracted.”

Senketsu shrugged. “I’d be careful what you say to him. He’s really emotional right now about love, for some reason?”

Those words started something in Uzu, drooling against his chest. His head snapped back too quickly for his neck, and he wobbled for a moment, off balance, before he snapped back and squished Ira’s cheeks together. His lips puffed out comedically and he leaned in close to whisper fiercely.

“My pal Senketz here-”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call us pals, really-”

Uzu shook his head so violently Ira grabbed either side of it to still him. “My pal, Senketz. He was all like, ‘you should kiss people you love,’ right, not like, regular people. I mean, ‘t's’not like y’all ain’t like, normal, but everyone in fuckin’... fuckin’ Akechi Incident, we’re all amazing, God, I love you all so much- but like, I should only do that with people I care about, or whatever. I‘m paraphrasing.”

Senketsu sounded highly annoyed now.

“When did I say any of that? Do you even know what paraphrasing is-”

“Anyway,” Uzu continued, “I want you to know you’re really special to me, okay, Ira? I love you so, so much, bro.”

“... I’m flattered, really, and I love you too, but- mrpGH-”

Uzu pulled his face towards his and kissed him open mouthed on the lips. Maybe the shock loosened his jaw from how it was tightly set from grinding his teeth, because a tongue sloppily made his way into his mouth.

He tasted like alcohol and bad decisions.

Still, he couldn’t help but feel guilty when Uzu whined as he pulled him away. “Bruh-”

“You need to rest before you start kissing the rest of us,” Ira managed, feeling significantly older and more tired than he actually was. “I love you too, but please, please refrain from surprise tonsil hockey-”

“You didn’t tell me you two were dating!”

Warily, he turned around to see Mako leaning forward on her elbows, eyes bright. “I had no idea-”

“We’re not dating,” Ira tried to explain, but Uzu chose that moment to snuggle into the crook of his arm, head resting on his shoulder. “He’s just heavily intoxicated and very affectionate, tonight…”

“Iraaaaaaaaaaa,” he whined, wrapping his arms around his neck. “We should, like, totally date.”

“Uzu, you are drunk.”

“But like, you’re hot. An’ I’m hot.” Suddenly, concern crept into his voice. “Am I not hot? Am I a shitty kisser?”

Senketsu looked like he was about to burst into laughter, if he was indeed even capable of doing such a thing. “You’re a perfectly good kisser-”

“Then, what’s stopping us?”

No words in the universe existed for how dearly he wished he wasn’t the designated driver at the moment. “For one, you look like you’re about to throw up again.”

“Ira, I don’ wanna walk.”

Mako looked at him expectantly. Uzu mimicked her perfectly. He groaned. “Fine. Get on my back.”

“Really? *Sweet*.”

Uzu clambered up excitedly on to Ira as he took a knee. His arms wrapped too tightly around Ira's neck, and he clung on for dear life, much like his namesake.

"Oi." Ira flicked Uzu between the eyes. "Don't squeeze so hard."

"*Iraaa,*" he sang, "I *loooove* you."

"That's nice, Uzu."

He wondered how he'd gotten himself into this. He wondered which Lovecraftian god he'd pissed off to make his life such a living hell. He wondered how Uzu could maintain his deathgrip on him.

"I'm kinda hungry."

"Me too." Mako looked up at Ira. "Can we stop by a McDonald's on the way back?"

Ira groaned out his defeat, and both Mako and Uzu cheered. He felt more tired than he'd ever felt before.

"Hey."

He could barely hear him with his hair falling over his face and muffling his words, but he grunted in response.

"Ira. Hey, Ira."

"What is it, Uzu?"

He could taste the whiskey on his breath when he spoke, words half-muffled against the skin of his throat.

"I jus' wanna say 'm really grateful for always being on my ass. You're always there for me, even when 'm fuckin' up."

"It's alright, Uzu. You're drunk. Just go to sleep."

"No, really, Ira. 'M sorry for smooching you. And I'm sorry I made you to to Taco Bell after we got McDonald's."

"Uzu, I said it's okay. Please just rest."

Uzu yawned loudly and snuggled his face further into Ira's shoulder. "Can y' promise me somethin'?"

“Sure. What is it?”

“Remind me-” he paused. “Wait. Did Nonon get her phone back?”

Ira glanced down absentmindedly at his phone. “According to these texts, yes.”

“Okay, good. Remind me to delete those photos off m’phone.”

“Yeah, sure, don’t worry.” Ira wondered what the hell he meant, but decided to appease him anyway. He was sure it was nothing.

He climbed the stairs up on to their floor, being careful not to disturb the sleeping guests. The clocks on the wall read 5:20. Uzu squeezed tightly, one hand holding Ira’s shoulder, the other clutching his bag of fast food to his chest. Ira did not stop at Uzu’s room, instead shifting his friend’s weight to his other arm so he could open his hotel room door. Uzu groaned in protest.

“Just sleep in my room for tonight, alright?” He made his way past his luggage and carefully placed the six-foot-three man onto the king-sized mattress. “Stay still. Don’t kick me. I’m taking your shoes off, alright?”

Ira wasn’t sure if he was too drunk to protest, but he took his nondescript grunt as a yes. He straightened up and tossed a pillow at Uzu. “Wait here.”

It wasn’t really like Uzu had much of an option, but Ira didn’t bother waiting for a reply. He leaned into the refrigerator and tossed him a liter bottle of water. Perhaps he had overestimated his hand-eye coordination, however, because the bottle bounced off of Uzu’s face and on to the mattress. The pitiful whine he let out almost made Ira feel guilty. Almost.

“And drink all of that before you go to sleep. You’ll thank me in the morning.”

Uzu rolled over into the pillow, one hand clutching the bottle, the other clutching his face. “Love you.”

The words were muffled by the fabric, but Ira smiled regardless. He was careful closing the door behind him.

The fluorescent lights of the hotel hallways had never been the most flattering, but he knew it wasn’t the light that made Nonon look so haggard. She stumbled towards him, phone clutched triumphantly in her hand. He smirked in her direction.

“How was your night?”

Nonon blinked slowly before reaching into her pocket. She pulled a scrap of lace out and thrust it into the air with a grin. “You tell me.”

He chuckled. “Do I need to tuck you in, too?”

“I’m good. Thanks for everything.” She wobbled across the hall, and gave him a thumbs up as she opened her door. “Hope you had a good night too.”

The sound of the door shutting closed echoed in the small hallway. He rubbed his temples and groaned.

“Is everything alright, Ira?”

He turned with a start. Behind him, arms crossed, still in her bathrobe, stood Satsuki, a gentle smile crossing her face.

“You’re up early.”

“It’s almost five-thirty. I’m not that early. You’re all just late,” she stated calmly. “I trust you all had a good time?”

Ira paused for a long moment.

“I guess you could say that.” It wasn’t exactly a lie, but he was suddenly very, very tired. “It’s just been a long night.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was over 22k words and six weeks in the making, but here it is, finally. I hope to get chapter 6 up very soon! The story is just starting to take off, and I'm excited to keep writing.

As always, my blog is satsukichan!

cigarettes

Chapter Summary

Well I've traveled millions of Marlboro miles, but I haven't gotten anywhere.
And I've made a million dollars in Camel cash, but I'm still just broke as when I started.

But that's OK because smoking makes you cool, and smoking makes you rule.
So just light up a smoke and you'll never go broke and you'll be the most popular kid in school

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he was eight and they called his energy boyishness and he had all of the Northern Kanto countryside to run around with, Uzu liked to play with swords. This was not, (surprisingly) in the vein of the jokes he'd like to make ten years later, a euphemism. Childhood was kind like that- it'd be a while before that phrase meant anything but the fun of a swinging sticks at the other local boys.

It didn't matter that he was eight and that he only got to practice kendo during his summer vacations spent with his grandparents, and for that he was behind most of the boys- he loved to play with swords. He was a wiry little kid, short for his age, and full of enthusiasm to compensate for it. The enthusiasm turned into dedication. Every morning, before the unforgiving midday sun burned his shoulders and tanned his skin, he could be heard in the yard, practicing. Day after day, the dedication turned into skill, and it wasn't long before he was besting boys older than he was, bored preadolescent kids that showed up to class because they had nothing better to do.

Even though there were days when the shinai was too heavy for him to hold it straight with his arms alone, he loved swords. The family business was another thing entirely, but his grandfather had been quite the kendo master in his youth- even still, with his arthritis setting in, he'd ruffle his hair and tell him how good he was.

And that, his father reminded him, was not a common thing to hear. "Your grandfather, he was always very sparing with his praise. Never hugged me. Never told me he loved me. Said it toughened me up. Maybe it did. Anyway, don't let it get to your head. It isn't an excuse to slack off with your studies. So go do your homework. Ms. Richards called, and she said you keep drawing in class instead of listening…"

But he cared too much. And maybe that made him an easy target, because the old adage about children being cruel was very much an understatement when you were short for your age and too enthusiastic about things most kids didn't care about.

“Nobody cares about Ninja Turtles or the Power Rangers anymore, Uzu,” Kevin told him. “Everyone’s playing Pokemon now. I think it’s Chinese, like sushi. You should know about it.”

“I’m Japanese,” he tried to say, but Kevin had already walked off to sit with the kids that had their handhelds out. Uzu felt a little lonely. He didn’t have a handheld. His parents told him he had to get his grades up, and he had kendo practice anyway, so it wasn’t like he had time to play with one. Kevin was a jerk.

(In the seventh grade, he would knock out four of his teeth and break his nose over a note he found in his locker. This would lead to him getting suspended for the second time in his life. But that was still a while off.)

At least he had his older brother at home to explain things to him. He was thirteen, and smart, even though his glasses slid down the bridge of his nose a lot, and he was always reading- Uzu didn’t get why he did that all the time. What was the fun at staring at a bunch of squiggles all day? They moved around too much to be easy to understand, and he was a lot better at hitting people with sticks anyway. Plus, when summer vacation rolled around, he’d be able to go back to his grandparents, and then maybe his dad would stop yelling at him (for breaking a vase, for fracturing his ribs climbing onto the roof, for failing another math test.)

There was summer vacation to look forward too, though, and that meant Okinawa beaches and more kendo when they spent the last few weeks of their time off with their grandparents. There was nothing quite like the tall grasses and open fields. Even the wooden floors of the dojo felt different under his bare feet. He was invincible- even a troublemaker like him was a Good Kid when he had yet to be defeated in class. All the other kids were scared of the tiny boy with the shinai that had struck down countless others.

So when his brother came in with his glasses cracked and his books gone, Uzu didn't hesitate to jump into the fray. He'd definitely find the kids that made his older brother cry and teach them not to pick on shy boys who just wanted to be left alone to read their... books. Play the piano. All those nerdy things he did.

The old adage, he remembered later, was to pick on people his own size. Recklessness and a burning desire to avenge his brother didn't compensate for the fact that even with a shinai in hand, he was still only eight (and a half!) years old, and maybe fifty pounds, if that.

(After a couple of dizzying punches from the middle schoolers slugging him, he dropped the sword and went for their ankles.)

His mother was waiting to yell at him at the door when he managed to drag himself back, but the admonishing words turned into a scream immediately when she got a good luck at his face, puffy and blue with bruises. His eyes were swollen shut, his nose leaking snot and blood over his cracked lips. Everyone stared at him in silence as he shuffled over to his brother, and silently handed him the torn up book he'd fought for.

They shared a moment of silent acknowledgment before worried hands grabbed at his shoulders and turned him to face her.

"Uzu," his mother whispered, "what *happened*?"

He tried to speak, but coughed and spat something white into his hand. His smile looked pained, perhaps in part for the two teeth missing from their place in the front of his mouth, but it was genuine through and through.

"I won," he declared triumphantly, and promptly passed out face first on the kitchen floor.

The hotel room reeked of weed.

This in itself was not, however, a particularly unusual scenario, and none of the three figures lounging about were any sort of strangers to softcore drug use.

“Hey, pass the joint, asshole.”

Houka grinned and blew an o ring at Uzu. “Someone’s greedy.”

“It’s called ‘puff puff pass’ for a reason. Don’t be a dick.”

“Shut it,” Nonon grumbled. “I’m trying to watch this.”

Her scarf was slipping out of place from the angle she was sprawled out on the bed, still and already at a comfortable high. The TV was playing some pastel colored cartoon he was sure he’d enjoy once the THC kicked on. For the moment, he was more concerned about how the wool slipping off her shoulders revealed the pale skin of her throat. He could see her hickies and they made his stomach twist in a way he was sure did not bode well for him.

Luckily for him, Houka finally handed him what was not much more than a roach, and he groaned and hoped it didn’t burn his fingers again when he took another pull. He held it until his body begged him for oxygen before he exhaled slowly, and immediately followed it with another drag. The smoke burned at his throat and lungs, but it was a comforting pain, and he barely felt it any more.

Ten years of smoking did that to you.

“We should air this place out,” he said finally, stubbing what was left out on an ashtray. “If Ira catches us again, we’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Mn,” He was sure it was a sound of agreement, but Nonon wasn’t enunciating clearly enough to tell. “Can we order in before we worry about the Toad, though? I’m fucking starving. I skipped breakfast because I was sleeping in.”

“If you hadn’t stayed out so late, maybe you’d have gotten to the buffet,” Houka snarked. His voice was too mellowed out to sound particularly harsh, and the grin he had on his face gave

him away. “The coffee was shit, but they had good bagels and the bacon was crispy. Oh, and the eggs were top notch.”

“You know I hate eggs. And it’s only, like, noon. Some people need their beauty sleep.”

“First off, it’s like, two. And second, I seriously doubt you got much sleep last night. You came in so late, Satsuki was getting up.”

“Satsuki gets up at the asscrack of dawn, though.”

“Still, that’s late.”

“Ugh, whatever.” She rolled over onto her side and poked Uzu in the head, none too gently. “Yo, monkey, be useful for once and order us something, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” he mumbled. “What are you in the mood for?”

“Fuck, I don’t know. Surprise us.” Nonon stretched out lazily, her foot dangling over the side of the bed so it almost hit him in the back of the bed. “I’m feeling chicken strips. I could go for mozzarella sticks, though. And fries.”

“I’ll get both.”

Houka sighed. “I want chinese. Can you order wonton soup and beef and broccoli?”

“I wanted pizza, but I could go with sweet and sour chicken, I guess.”

“Get me fried rice,” Nonon interjected. “I’m still kinda fucked up from last night, I could use the carbs.”

“Try working out in the morning. It helps with the hangovers.” He pulled his shirt up and slapped his abs. “You don’t get these by accident, y’know.”

“Of *course* you’d know that,” she grumbled. “How about you just order the food, alright?”

He stuck his tongue out at her, and she rolled her eyes.

Houka leaned back on his hands and sighed. “So, what were you doing last night? Did your tryst with Matoi work out?”

“Is the sky blue?”

“Nice. Hot date?”

Uzu wasn’t sure he wanted to hear this, but he wasn’t in the mood to speak too much to change the conversation. Plus, Houka’s lap was really inviting, and he plopped down in it, head resting on his thigh instead of getting up. That seemed like a lot of work at the moment.

“Okay, so you know I don’t usually do flings, right?”

He pulled up his phone to look at what they could order, in hopes of being able to drown out this conversation. Above him, Houka nodded.

“Alright, so it turns out she’s really good with her tongue-”

“Wait. Who’s gonna tip the delivery dude?”

His voice was too loud for the enclosed space, and for his efforts he received two very irritated looks from both of his companions, but at least it distracted them long enough for him quickly derail in the conversation.

“Uh-”

“I paid for the weed, and the food’s on my card, so one of you should tip.” Uzu continued. “We got a lotta shit.”

Houka and Nonon glanced at each other blankly before clenching their fists simultaneously.

“Best out of three?” he asked.

She stared at him for a moment before nodding. “You’re on.”

“Rock, paper, scissors-”
“Rock, paper, scissors-”

Maybe he hadn’t had enough to smoke, because he still felt nauseous when Nonon’s scarf slipped loose. There was a particularly huge lovebite on her neck just under her jaw. He didn’t want to think about how it’d ended up there, or who had put it there, but his brain refused to cooperate with him. Fantasies of the explicit sort flitted through his head anyway.

He wondered momentarily if they’d stayed in her hotel room, the way he’d crashed at Ira’s, or if they’d fucked in the club bathroom, or maybe in the limo on the way back. He wondered why it made him feel lowkey ill- girls were hot. In his experience at least, from all the threesomes he’d shared with couples, usually the mental image of two girls together was enough to at least give him a chub, but his pants stayed both woefully flat and his stomach rolled unpleasantly.

Uzu wondered for a lot longer why he cared so much. He carefully studied his palms, but they were just clammy and damp. His stomach turned as Nonon’s shoulder further dislodged her scarf out of place. Was Matoi a person or the human incarnation of a leech? *Jeez.*

Yeah, he definitely needed a joint to himself. Maybe a cig to take the edge off his increasingly anxious racing thoughts.

“I’m gonna go out for a smoke,” Uzu mumbled. Neither of them heard him over their increasingly loud argument. But as he stood to leave, Nonon's brow furrowed.

"But, like. We're already smoking," she said, gesturing around the room. “Why do you need to go outside?"

"Uh."

"She's right," Houka interjected. "We very explicitly got you a smoking room for that reason."

Uzu hesitated, seemingly at a loss for words. “Oh.”

“Yeah, dude, what's wrong?"

He was sure the concern in their voices was genuine on some level, but at the moment, all he could feel was paranoia coiling in his gut. Whatever joke they were in on, it wasn't funny.

"I'm just going out to get us some snacks before the food gets here," he lied. "It's no big deal. I'm out of cigarettes, anyway."

"While you're out there, can you get us some Cheetos?" Nonon asked. "I always crave Cheetos when I have the munchies."

"Yeah, sure," he murmured. The door felt an eternity away. "Anything else?"

“Yeah, actually, could you-"

As Houka spoke, Uzu reached into his pocket and yanked out his wallet with little fanfare, much to his spluttering protests. "Cool, thanks for paying, you’re a real bro. I'll be back with the Cheetos later."

“Wait, Uzu-”

He was out the door before anyone could effectively stop him, fingers already reaching for the half empty pack of Camels in his pocket.

As far as first kisses went, it wasn’t anything spectacularly special, just a peck on the lips, and definitely much tamer than what his peers would probably assume.

Still, it’d meant a lot to him at the time. Uzu’s palms were sweaty, but he reminded himself that he was almost twelve, and he really liked Taylor. He’d liked Taylor from the first time they shared their gum with him at recess. Uzu particularly liked the way Taylor always took the opportunity to pair up with him in class when they were told to pick partners. Most people just ignored him at best, or straight up avoided him.

“I like how exuberant you are,” Taylor said seriously. They were both chewing gum pretty furiously, competing to see who could blow the biggest bubbles. Uzu was winning by a landslide, but this didn’t seem to bother Taylor. “My mom said that was a good SAT word, whatever that means. It means you’re really hyper.”

“Cool,” Uzu replied. He was too focused on seeing if the pink double bubble bubble could get to the size of his head.

“Everyone else is really boring,” Taylor continued, twisting the chewing gum wrapper through their fingers. “I don’t like them. They always wanna do things that’ll get us in trouble. I mean, you get into trouble a lot, but you’re funny. And really cute.”

This stopped him in his tracks. The bubble popped over his nose, and there were a few panicked seconds of him pulling the pink goop off his face before he could fully response.

“Boys aren’t cute,” he protested. “They’re cool.”

Taylor backpedaled immediately. “You’re cool too!”

“That’s bullcr- bullshit,” he said, with more bravado than he felt, swearing like that. Taylor’s face flushed pink. “I’m not cute.”

“Well, I think you are,” Taylor muttered sullenly. “Boys can be cute if they want to be.”

Uzu hesitated.

“Well, you better think I’m cool too,” he continued. "Because I think you're cool."

There was a long pause between them, and Taylor’s face flushed red again in the way faces were not supposed flush red when complemented by someone else. It looked nice, admittedly, framed by the dark curls of their afro framing their head like a halo.

“Thanks, Uzu.”

“It’s not a problem,” he mumbled, surprised at how his face had heated up too. “But I guess you’re cute too.”

Taylor beamed at him.

Walking through the streets of Seattle in the early fall wasn’t an entirely unpleasant way to spend the early afternoon. All in all, it’d be a very nice stroll, were it not for the fact that he’d forgotten to bring his jacket in his rush to get out of earshot of Nonon and her tales of how good Ryuko Matoi was at giving head. The wind chill wasn’t helped much by the fact that his shirt didn’t really have anything resembling sleeves, or for that matter, sides. He got a few dirty looks from people walking past him. Maybe he did kind of look like a douche in combat boots, an open -side tank top, and skinny jeans that were more hole than denim. He was positively sure the ponytail and Ray-Bans didn’t make him look like any less of a complete tool, but at least his eyes didn’t hurt. Uzu was glad he’d remembered to bring shades.

Now all he had to do was find a convenience store and not get lost on his way back. He had promised to buy chips, right? He couldn't for the life of him remember what kind. They were radioactive orange, and that was all he could remember. Were they Doritos? They were probably Doritos. God, he wanted sweet chili heat all of the sudden.

The cigarette in his hand was comforting, though.

He was about to take another drag before a voice caught him off guard.

"Oi, you."

Hm? He didn't slow down. The call repeated behind him.

"You. Yeah, you, the hipster with the tattoos. Oi."

God, he definitely wasn't stoned enough for this. His feet slowed in his tracks as turned to find a man with a ruddy complexion who looked incredibly irritated, for whatever reason. Uzu made a mental note of rolling himself another joint when he got back to the hotel room, if Houka and Nonon hadn't smoked his entire stash before he got back.

"What is it?"

The portly man pointed at his cigarette and then at his door. "You can't smoke here. Not within twenty-five feet of my establishment."

Uzu blinked in response. "What?"

The hand gestures got more aggressive this time as the shop owner pointed again. "Don't just walk by here with your shitty skull shirt and carcinogen-packed death sticks. There are people trying to breathe around here."

Holy fuck, he really wasn't feeling this.

"Sir, I'll be on my way. I'm sorry if I've disrupted your iron lung, or whatever-"

"Put that filthy thing out," he snapped in response. "We don't all wanna die not being able to breathe and coughing our lungs out. Ya ever heard of emphysema, young man?"

He stared blankly before taking another drag. The man's face turned an excellent shade of puce before he dropped the remains and crushed the butt under his heel.

"My bad."

The man's eyes pierced him with a death glare as he walked further away. A chalk line marked the limit of the buffer zone, and he very carefully removed another cigarette from the package in front of the man.

"Is this far away enough for you?" he called, hand cupped around his mouth. "Because, uh, I feel like coughing my lungs out. I fuckin' love tasting like a goddamn ashtray."

If puce was bad, his face edged in on prune as Uzu very deliberately lit the cigarette. He couldn't resist a smirk as he walked away. Very vaguely, he might have caught a muttered "dickhead", but he couldn't bring himself to give a shit about anything that wasn't sweet chili heat Doritos.

Uzu: 1. Everyone else: 0.

The note on the post-it he'd found in his desk was written in shaky cursive, but if he squinted he could just barely decipher the words *"meet me behind the swings!"*, and there was no way he'd miss it.

They swung silently, hands grazing from the proximity of their seats, and he wasn't sure who leaned in first, but he did remember how their fingers tangled and his lips were dry when he felt Taylor awkwardly press his mouth against his.

As far as first kisses went, it could've been better. All he felt was the sensation of heat and chapped lips and a sudden intense need for lip balm, accompanying the embarrassing stutter of his heartbeat. Taylor looked just as embarrassed as he did.

"Do you wanna try that again?" Uzu managed. It sounded more like a whisper than he'd wanted it to, but he was determined.

Taylor nodded eagerly and puckered his lips, screwing his face into a kissy face with his eyes shut. Uzu's eyes darted around nervously before leaning forward again, hurried and fast and childish. Their noses bumped clumsily as their faces touched, and Taylor shook his head as if to clear it before they tried one more time.

Teeth clacked together, and they pulled away quickly, hands pressed to their lips.

"Ow-"
"Shit-"

They looked at each other and burst into peals of laughter. Briefly, he wondered if he'd chipped a tooth before hands pulled his face back and kissed him again. Taylor's hands were cool against the skin of his face, burning up with emotions he wasn't sure how to address. He wanted to run away. He wanted to do it again.

But he looked at Taylor instead of doing either of those things, and his face was so sweet smiling up at him, he couldn't stand it.

"I, uh, my mom wants me home before three, because my brother's gotta stay home and watch over me while she runs errands," he stammered out. "So, uh, I'll see you around, I guess?"

“Okay, then.” The disappointment in Taylor’s voice was palpable, and it burned at the back of Uzu’s throat. “I’ll see you around too.”

(He’d get used to that feeling where his stomach dropped and acid burned in his throat.)

“But-” Uzu blurted quickly. “I- this was nice. Unexpected, but nice.”

This was a lie. They both knew it.

“You can still come over this Saturday if you want- my mom’s buying pizza,” he added quickly.

“Yeah, I’ll do that.” Taylor’s face broke back into a smile. “Can we watch Dragon Ball Z?”

“Totally.” Uzu raised his hand in a half-hearted wave that didn’t fully convey the way his face twisted as he tried not to grin. “I’ll see you then, okay?”

Butterflies battered the inner walls of his stomach, and he felt like his torso would tear open and he’d spill into the autumn sky, he was smiling so much. He wouldn’t trade his place with anyone in the world for all the pizza in the world.

The boys all had shirts that were either slightly too tight, or much too big, ill fitting in the peculiar way that only shirts worn by pubescent boys could fit, and they surrounded him in a awkward semi-circle against the gym lockers. Uzu couldn’t be too sure. He’d skipped algebra and geometry a lot this year, but even he knew he didn’t have good odds with the ratio of people who wanted him bleeding way out of his favor.

He’d give anything to not be here right now.

“That was your handwriting on the note in my locker,” he managed. “And I know it was you who ripped up my english test. So you know what? You can go screw yourself.”

His words rang hollow. Half the kids in the crowd surrounding him looked like they belonged in high school, the other half looked like they could still be in elementary school. Unfortunately for him, he was one of them.

“Big words coming from a-”

“What did you just call me?”

It didn’t help his voice cracked spectacularly on the last word of his sentence. The ugly sniggers from the other boys made his ears heat up.

“Can’t spell? It’s what you are. You think you were bein’ sneaky running around with him?”

“Hey, you think he’ll suck our...?”

Their laughter rang in the back of his head, but only faintly. Blood boiled in his ears, flushing under his skin, at the smug, dense smile plastered on the boy’s face. There was a single thought in his brain at the moment, and nerve and neuron harmonized in exactly the way his fist and Kevin’s nose didn’t.

There was an extremely satisfying crunching noise, and the kids stopped laughing in lieu of drawing back immediately. A lone giggle escaped one of them, and Kevin looked at Uzu stupidly. A tiny trickle of blood rolled down his face and onto his chin.

“Fuck you.”

It came out braver than he felt. There was a very long second before he felt hands at his shirt collar, and metal behind his head.

Suddenly, the entire room was alive with screaming. Kevin was much heavier and sweatier than he was, and all he could think about was the awkward, tired voice of their health teacher explaining that they would soon be growing hair in strange places, and also how good it felt when his knuckles made contact with his face.

It didn’t last long. His fist pulled back and Uzu’s head bounced off the tiled floor in response to the punch. Stars blinked in front of his eyes, and then Kevin was slugging him repeatedly. His face would be black and blue for days. His eyes were already swelling shut, lip split, tongue bitten. He tasted the tang of metal between his teeth.

Wait. Teeth. He had teeth. And hands. And nothing to lose.

Kevin let out a spectacular howl of pain when he chomped down on his arm, incisors digging into flabby flesh. “HE’S *BITING ME*-”

Someone pulled their leg back, and he knew what was going to happen before it did, but amidst the screaming of the kids around him, without anyone there to extend a helping hand, there was nothing he could do. There was blood dripping down his face onto the disgusting locker room floor, and blood ringing in his ears, and another sickening crack as the foot came down on the arm he was using to pin Kevin’s arm towards his mouth. It went limp before he felt anything.

But the numbness didn’t last long. Blinding pain made his vision blank out, and he realized he was screaming. His spare hand dug into the other boy’s face, and momentum won over, and he was slamming his elbow into his face over and over, tears gushing down his face.

“What in the *HELL* is going on in here-”

A much larger hand grabbed him by the back of the shirt and pulled upward. Faintly, he felt something thick and hot pouring down the arm that wasn’t twisted in the wrong direction.

“There’s *NO FIGHTING*-”

Kevin scrambled to his feet, blood pouring out of his nose and mouth. *“HE STARTED IT.”*

Words spilled out of his mouth, but they were all wrong, and the teacher's brow furrowed further. He was in deep shit this time- he noticed the smug, slow grin spreading across his opponent's face, ignored the burning pain spasming up his fractured arm, and decided then and there that he wasn't going down like this.

(You'd cut off your nose to spite your face, Uzu.)

The teacher yelled at the sudden movement, and he angled himself back just right and slammed both of his feet into Kevin's jaw, knocking them both over. The bigger boy scrambled over to him in an attempt to further pummel his face in, but their teacher ripped them apart, everyone's voices lost in the deafening din they were certainly raising. Uzu's arm twisted further and he involuntarily yelped in pain. It was only then the teacher seemed to realize the ridiculous disparity in their sizes.

"Can you make it to the nurse? By yourself?"

He wanted to throw up from the pain, but he nodded anyway. Kevin clambered back onto his hands and feet, tearstained face eliciting no mercy or sympathy from Uzu. Pain shot up his arm as he made his way through the silent crowd.

The principal looked sternly down into his seat. He tried his best to shrink down deeper into it. He could not remember a time that he had ever wished he were smaller.

"Young man," he began, tapping his thick fingers against the desk, "you do realize fighting is against school regulations, right?"

Uzu looked at him blankly before pointing at his cast. "Mister, you do realize breaking someone's arm is also against school regulations?"

"Don't be rude," his mother hissed. "Every time you do this, I have to take time off from work."

"But mom, I didn't start this fight," he protested. "They... they called me names..."

His principal readjusted his glasses. "All eyewitnesses say you threw the first punch. That your classmate broke your arm was an unfortunate result of the fight you instigated."

He swallowed thickly. "So, what are you gonna do?"

The bespectacled man slid a piece of paper across the table. "Can you write out the names that you claim they called you?"

Uzu picked up the pencil. He thought of his father, and his stern gaze, the word repeated, ugly in his mouth at the six o'clock news. He thought of his mother, and the way her nails

were digging into the back of his seat. He leaned over the paper to conceal his words as he wrote.

Those three letters in his head echoed over and over again. He slid the paper back across the desk. In bold letters, there read two words. The older man's face purpled.

"Missus Sanageyama, I thought you taught your son better manners than this."

He unfolded the piece of paper and held it out. In block letters, "FUCK YOU" read in all caps, complete with a crude doodle of himself performing a rather rude hand gesture.

There was a sharp intake of breath on his mother's end. Something pinched his ear and pulled upwards.

"Ow ow ow ow ow *ow ow OW OW OWOWOWOW*-"

"We didn't raise you to swear," she hissed into his ear. "Don't be such a little shit."

The man across the table cleared his throat. She narrowed her eyes at him. "Unfortunately, given the evidence, we're going to have to suspend your son for two weeks. He broke another student's nose. Given that this is his second suspension in a year, we should probably consider further disciplinary action if he is to be suspended again in the next few months."

The disappointment radiating off of his mother could have powered a city, but in typical fashion, her voice turned to ice at the man's words. "Are you saying you no longer want my son in your school?"

"Well, that seems a bit harsh, don't you think? Expulsion is a very severe punishment, but I will warn you, Uzu, if you're to pull another stunt like that again during your tenure at this school, I will not hesitate to have you transferred out. It’s our three-strikes regulations. We have a very strict anti-bullying policy-"

"Are you *shitting* me?"

This time, his mother smacked him across the back of the head. "Don't be vulgar. When your father hears about this-"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I know. I'll catch hell when he gets home from his business trip." He pushed his seat back and got on to his feet unsteadily. Without his arm, it was tricky to find his balance. Of all the inconvenient things that would result from not being able to use one of his arms, it would only occur to him when he was in the backseat of his mom’s car, tuning out her complaints of ‘hospital bills’ that he realized he couldn’t go to kendo practice if he couldn’t hold the shinai.

“Hey, do you think he'll hit a kid with a broken arm?"

The satisfaction of the uncomfortable looks on both his mother and his principal's faces was something he'd pay for later, and dearly. But for the moment, it was worth every single slap he’d face.

(And as it turned out, yes, yes he would.)

The week Taylor moved away, they held hands twice, and Uzu kissed him awkwardly behind the basketball court.

"I'm sorry I'm leaving," he said, and Uzu could feel the way his palm was sweaty against his. "My mom got a better job at a different hospital. But if it makes you feel any better, you were a pretty cool boyfriend."

Uzu nodded in response. "That's cool," he replied. "Do you think you can lend me a pencil? My arm gets really itchy under this cast."

"Uh, sure, let me check my bag."

It was only as he was reaching into his backpack that a loud horn caught them off guard. A woman in a green scoop neck sweater leaned out the driver's seat of a shiny black minivan. "Taylor?"

"Shoot, it's my mom," he muttered. "Uh, well, I hope I see you again. Did you add me on MySpace?"

"Yeah, no, don't worry, I'll message you." Uzu managed. "Here's to a long-distance relationship."

There was an intensely awkward moment of silence before he presented his fist for a bump, and Uzu swung in for a high-five. They readjusted and leaned in for hugs instead. Taylor squeezed tighter than he did. "I'll see you around."

He could tell Taylor wanted to kiss him, but with his mother watching, there was no way that was happening. The other boy opened his mouth to say something, but Uzu turned on his heel and ran. It was easier than saying goodbye.

They didn’t talk after that.

“He’s gonna cough.”

“Fuck that, I bet you five bucks and a coke he’ll hurl.”

“You’re on.”

He put the unfiltered Newport to his lips hesitantly. The girl holding the lighter leaned forward and clicked the wheel. The tiny flame flickered to life, and he hesitantly inhaled as the tip burned. There was an outburst of whooping and laughter as his eyes immediately watered and he jackknifed over, hacking up a lung.

“Yo, Sanageyama, don’t be a fuckin’ pussy,” one of the sophomores called out. “Finish the thing or hand it over. Shit ain’t cheap.”

He wheezed in response, lungs burning. The jeers colored his face red. He inhaled again and felt the smoke settle in his chest, blood vessels constricting. The jeers faded.

Maybe this is what his teachers said about hanging with the wrong crowd- a mishmash of upperclassmen that he’d met through his various stints in detention. Therein lay the perils of K-12 schools- none of his companions were less than two years older than he was.

That was okay with him. The alternative of hanging out with the other eighth graders was significantly more gross than having to smile at jokes he didn’t get. And anyway, he was a teenager now. He was only doing as teenagers did.

(He didn’t tell him mom why he threw up later. The soft pack and the cheap butane lighter in his pocket felt heavy in a way he didn’t understand just yet.)

The nearest 7/11 was still overly air conditioned, despite it being early october. He supposed it was an unusually lovely day, but he had to resist the urge to shiver at the sudden coolness of the stale air behind the automatic doors. The girl behind the register didn’t even bother looking up at him as he wandered into the snack aisle uncertainly.

Okay, so sweet chili heat was definitely on the menu, but maybe he should get something to cut the richness of the food. He knew Houka didn't really like beer, but beer would be nice, maybe? The lights were too flourescent for him right now. And since when were all the packages so brightly colored? Sugar laden sweets gleamed prettily at him as he walked through the cramped aisles, bag of chips tucked neatly under his arm.

God, the gross, suspiciously greasy food under the heat lamps could be good too, as did the microwavable burritos. The slushee machines also looked tempting, but he doubted his ability to bring back three at a time, and besides, he and Nonon had once gotten into an argument over whether blue raspberry or red cherry tasted better. Uzu frowned in the direction of the slushees and looked blearily in the direction of the alcoholic drinks in the back.

He wasn't the only person there. Three teenage girls were huddled around a nervously clutched twelve pack of Bud Light. His nose wrinkled at the cheap beer, but he had barely cracked open the fridge door before they guiltily looked up from what was sure to be illegally purchased crap alcohol.

They stared at each other for long moment. Uzu blinked before it occurred to him, through the fog in his head, that, just maybe, a twenty something keeping prolonged eye contact with a gaggle of kids (that couldn't be more than, say, sixteen) could be misconstrued as creepy. He coughed awkwardly and turned to look at the pitiful selection of beer, before a small voice caught him off-guard.

"Um, mister, sorry if we're mistaken, but you don't happen to be Uzu Sanageyama?"

Fans?

The girls had the sudden gleam of cats that had caught their prey. It was in stark contrast to the blatant nervousness they'd had only a minute ago. His eyes narrowed behind the dark lenses in his glasses.

"Yeah, that's me, I guess."

One of the girls made a small noise that sounded suspiciously like a stifled shout of excitement. A flurry of half shushed whispers broke out amongst them, faces flushed with excitement. Despite himself, a smile broke out over his face. Shouter looked incredibly pleased with herself. The other two exchanged nervous looks before looking up at him.

"Can... can we have autographs? Maybe a photo? We're pretty huge fans..."

Uzu shifted the bag of Doritos under his arm awkwardly. "Sure."

One of them squealed, and then cut herself off, looking embarrassed. Uzu resisted the urge to chuckle to himself. He didn't actually mind fans, but he did wish they would put back the cheapass beer. It hurt his gut to look at.

The half-heartedly scribbled signatures on the notebooks the girls presented were clutched tightly to their chests, and the tallest of the girls hesitantly pulled her phone out. "Uh, can we just take selfies?"

"Yeah, why not?" He pulled the shades off, and winced at the sudden bright light. God, he hoped he didn't look too obviously stoned. The weed on his breath reeked. Eugh, gross.

The girls smushed their cheeks together, and he tried to not exhale as he smiled into the front facing camera, fingers folded into a peace sign. The tiny lightbulb flashed unexpectedly, and he hoped to god he hadn’t blinked.

“Thank you so much-”

He nodded, but as he turned away, a nervous hand caught the hem of his shirt. Confused, he looked down at the girl who had stayed quietest.

“What is it?”

“Uh, mister-”

“Just call me Uzu.”

She blushed. “Okay, uh, Uzu… can you do us a solid?”

“Huh?”

“Can… can you buy us this for us?”

Uzu blinked and looked down at the Bud Light, clutched in her arms. Eyes trailed from the beer to the tiny cards in the hand of the other two. “Are those your fake IDs?”

“Y-yeah, but we don’t think they’re convincing enough-”

Her voice trailed off as he shifted the beer in one arm a little and frowned.

“At the risk of sounding like a tool, if you wanna pass off a fake, come alone. Gaggles of nervous teens make it more obvious that your ID is bullshit. Or just don’t do drugs, kids.”

The trio stared at him blankly as he walked past them. He wondered if he had sounded as lame as he felt.

He wasn't stoned enough to deal with this.

The cashier barely looked up at them as he slid the bag of Doritos across the counter. "Can I have a pack of Camel Wides?"

Bored Cashier sighed and reached behind them to pull a pack off the wall. "Your total is $15.38-"

She blinked when he pulled a twenty out of Houka's wallet and slid it across the table. “Can you do me a solid, miss?”

“Do you a what, now?”

“Don’t let teenagers buy beer here from now on.”

“Jeez, I card, same as anyone else. Do I look that irresponsible to you? I need this job.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Do I need to card you too?”

Uzu pulled Houka’s license out of the wallet with a completely straight face. She arched an eyebrow at the photo. “Nice haircut. And glasses. Are the piercings new?”

He didn’t so much as hesitate. “Old photo.”

“Issued three months ago?”

“A lot can change in three months.”

She sighed. “Need a bag for that?”

When Uzu was thirteen years old, he discovered punk rock, and as it did the lives of many thirteen year old boys, it changed his life. Of course, this didn’t change the fact that he was, again, thirteen, and lived with his parents in the suburbs of New Jersey. In fact, it only served to amplify it.

"Y'know, Uzu, maybe you should find a more constructive outlet for your teenage angst than cutting your classes and tagging up the back of the 7-11."

"Shut up," he mumbled. "I don't need a four-eyed nerd telling me what to do with my teenage angst. If I remember correctly, the most rebellious thing you ever did was come home at eleven thirty-five instead of eleven thirty. I’m the one going through puberty her- oh, fuck."

His brother chuckled under his breath. His voice had cracked spectacularly. "Yes, I'm well aware you're going through puberty. I'm the one that has to wake you up in the mornings, remember?"

Uzu groaned loudly. "Shut *uuuuup*." He rolled over onto his back and threw an arm over his face. "Just because you've got a girlfriend and you're going to college doesn't mean that you get to tell me what to do. I can still kick your ass in Halo.”

"Yeah, well, I'm still your older brother, and seniority rules." He got off of Uzu's bed and stretched towards the ceiling, smirking. "You don't get to say shit until you grow an inch or two."

He couldn't deny this. At thirteen, he was still only 4'11, and the shortest kid in his grade. Uzu scowled in his brother's direction. Gently, he flicked him between the eyes and leaned down to whisper in his ear. It was infuriating how far he had to bend over.

"Have you been drinking your milk lately?"

"Oh, fuck off."

His brother put him in a headlock and ground his knuckles against his scalp, to his loud protests. Unfortunately, a knock on the door interrupted them. Uzu felt his brother drop him in lieu of looking towards the door.

"Father?"

(Funny how the Japanese that was meant to be his mother tongue felt heavy on his tongue.)

A stern-looking man opened the door, and he felt his brother slap his back as a reminder to sit up straight, as if he needed one. Mister Sanageyama had always inspired a sort of respect that

even Uzu couldn't deny him. Still, he felt a chill run up his spine when the cold grey eyes he had inherited honed in on him.

"I'd like to speak to Uzu alone, please."

The elder Sanageyama sibling did not protest. He shot his younger brother a look of sympathy as he slipped out of the door. Uzu resisted the urge to give him the finger.

But for the moment, he had his father to deal with, and he had the vague sneaking suspicion he knew what his father was here to talk to him about. No matter what, it could not bode well for him. He tried to give him a huge smile, as if he didn't know he was absolutely fucked. His father never bothered to show up to his room unless something was seriously wrong.

"Wipe that stupid grin off your face, Uzu. You look like even more of an idiot."

The half hearted attempt at levity slid off his face. "What is it?"

His father's eyebrows furrowed behind the glasses that he shared with his older son. On his brother, they made him look nonthreatening; on his father, they made Uzu's blood run cold. Incredible how something as simple as a pair of glasses could change a man's face. He alone of the Sanageyama men had been spared eye problems.

"Don't you 'what is it?' me. You know damn well what's wrong."

He sank deeper into his mattress and averted his eyes when he felt him sit next to him. Hairs stood up on the back of his neck, mouth dry, face tight. It was always his knee-jerk reaction to laugh when he was scared, but regret burned in his throat immediately. The faint chuckle he let out by reflex wasn't appreciated.

"Oh, so now you think this is funny, huh? You're failing half your classes and the other half you're passing by the skin of your teeth. I got a call from your school today- interrupted me in the middle of my goddamn meeting- telling me they'd caught you smoking in the boys' bathroom. And last week, they told me you got into a fistfight with another kid. And you think this is a game?"

He didn't dare respond. It only made things worse if he did.

"You aren't an idiot, Uzu. But you sure are acting like one. Picking fights, cutting classes- I didn’t raise a delinquent. I raised an honorable young man, and I expect you to act like one, you understand?"

Uzu nodded meekly. Maybe his father felt guilty, because he sighed and ran a hand through thinning hair. "Just don't act like a fool. I didn't raise a goddamn fool."

He wished he'd just slap him and get it over with already. The disappointment ran thick as blood in his voice. Uzu stared at his knees, counted the new scabs he'd gotten from skateboarding down a hill too fast, wondered if they'd hurt more than if his father had just backhanded him.

There was a long moment before the bed creaked and he stood up. "It's not that difficult, Uzu. Just try and be more like your brother."

A huge lump formed in the base of his throat where his Adam's apple was supposed to be. He couldn't understand why it was so hard to swallow. Spit collected in his mouth as he tried in vain to get past the mysterious and obnoxious rock suddenly blocking the way. The door clicked closed behind his father.

There was a beat before the door swung open again. However, this time, a younger face poked his head in.

"Yo, Uzu, are you okay?"

Without looking up, he nodded mutely. Maybe his face was showcasing something he hadn't meant to show, because there was an immediate change in his brother's countenance. If he squinted hard enough, he could detect something akin to sympathy.

"Hey. You know what'll cheer you up?"

He shook his head.

“You like the Sex Pistols, if I remember?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“Sid Vicious played the bass, right?”

This sounded like it was going somewhere weird. Eyes narrowed at the elder Sanageyama sibling, who smiled as innocently as he could back down at him.

“He played a Fender bass guitar, if you must know.”

“Whatever. The point is, you need a hobby.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll meet you downstairs. I gotta swing by work, and I think there’s something in it for you.”

Uzu looked at him through squinted eyes. His brother smiled, the textbook definition of saintly.

“No strings attached. Or should I say, four?”

“I’ll see you in the car.”

The news of his grandfather's death came just a few months shy of his fourteenth birthday. He'd remember it clearly later because he was busy practicing chords on the shiny red bass that he was still loath to take out of its case when his father walked in, face ashen.

"Pack a suitcase," he muttered in his native Japanese. "Your grandfather just died. We're flying out tomorrow morning. Tell your mother to call T-"

"Already did," his mother called from the other room. "He'll meet us at the airport tomorrow, straight from school."

"Use your brother as an example of how to act this upcoming week," His father scolded. "I won't stand for any sort of disappointments."

He looked exhausted. Something in his face made him look far older than Uzu knew he was, and he swallowed thickly. "I won't-"

"And stop messing around with that damn thing. All you do is play that stupid guitar-"

"It's a bass-"

"*Don't* talk back to me. You need to do your homework. And I've been getting calls from the dojo. Have you been skipping kendo classes?"

Uzu stared at his worn out sneakers. "It's hard to get to class without Tsu-"

"Don't use your brother as an excuse for you to slack off. Take the bus. Ride your bike. Walk, if you need to. This meant a lot to my fath- your grandfather. At least respect the memory of the deceased, for the sake of all that is good and holy."

Words bubbled under his skin, hot and angry, even as his teeth ground and his jaw stayed firmly shut. The old fart wasn't even cold in the ground yet and his dad was already dragging out his corpse out to guilt him. September already felt too cold to remind him of summers when he was younger and the wood felt warm under his bare feet, shoulders tanned, his grandfather looking on in approval. He wasn't in the mood for his dad to take his barely repressed grief out on him.

For the first time in his life, he realized he needed a smoke.

This time, he'd assured Ira, he'd stay sober. And here he was, huddled outside, cigarette in hand, clean as a baby's bottom, tolerating the wind chill as his lungs turned grey as ash. He was a walking chimney.

He wasn't alone. A few other stragglers were getting their nicotine fix outside, hands all cupped around their Newports and Marlboros and Camels and American Spirits, tiny lights

pinpricks in the darkening night. Next to him, a clean cut bespectacled young man was having some trouble getting his lighter to produce a steady light.

"Fuck," he swore under his breath, clicking at the wheel of his cheap butane lighter to no avail. "Shit."

Uzu waited patiently for the inevitable question. Sheepishly, the young man turned to him, unlit cigarette in hand.

"Sorry, dude, but can I bum a light?" He gestured half heartedly at the useless piece of plastic in his hand. "This thing's a piece of shit."

Wordlessly, he extended his zippo in the man's direction, and he leaned into the open flame, the tip crackling and burning in the near silence of the evening. He took an appreciative drag and exhaled in the opposite direction, sighing contently.

"Thanks, dude," he mumbled around the cigarette in his mouth. "I appreciate it."

"No problem." Uzu ran his spare hand through his hair and took another drag. "You a big *Akechi* fan?"

"Not really, no, actually. My boyfriend is really into them, though, but he doesn't like me smoking, so I'm just sneaking a quick smoke before the show. I'm supposed to be trying to quit, but nicotine gum isn't cutting it, y'know? I can't do this cold turkey."

"I haven't tried quitting. Maybe I should." He narrowed his eyes at the stick in his hand, deceptively light. "I'm going through half a pack a day lately."

"Good luck, dude."

They both inhaled in shared silence.

"So, how about you?"

"Hm?"

"You asked me if I was an Akechi Incident fan. Are you?"

He bit back the impulse to laugh. "I guess so. I like Freshbloods' sound better though, if we're going to be honest."

"They're opening, right? I've heard of them before, vaguely. Didn't their lead singer get into a fight with Omiko Hakodate?"

"That's them. Give them a listen. They're still pretty indie, but they're gonna be big."

"They have a robot for a drummer, if I remember correctly?"

"At the risk of sounding like an asshole, they're actually an android, and he plays the ba-"

The door swung open, creaking loudly on unoiled hinges. Uzu's voice trailed off as a young man with jaw-length dreadlocks poked his head out.

"Yo, Charlie, are you out here again?"

The guy whose cigarette Uzu had lit immediately dropped it and ground the butt under his heel. "Uh-"

"Fuck, Charlie, you're supposed to be trying to quit."

"Sorry, babe, I swear I'm trying." He leaned down to give the man a kiss on the cheek. "It's just hard going cold turkey..."

He knew, faintly, that people were speaking in front of him, but it didn't feel like he was quite there. He was sober, so...

"...and I know you'll love them, just-" The man with dreads trailed off. "Wait."

Oh no.

"Holy shit, *Uzu*? Oh my god, is that you?"

(Anywhere but here, he needed to be anywhere but here-)

Unfortunately, he still lacked the ability to teleport at will, and here he remained, staring blankly into the face of his ex-boyfriend, over ten years after the fact.

"Hi, Taylor," he managed weakly. "Small world, huh?"

"Wait." The man he assumed was named Charlie blinked. “Do you know each other?”

“Uh-”

Charlie looked very confused, but if Taylor had noticed, he didn’t care, because he kept barrelling forward at full speed, words spilling eagerly from his mouth as he tried to say several things at once. When they were eleven, it had been endearing. In their twenties it… was still kind of cute.

“We went to middle school together!”

“Yeah, we were really good friends-”

“He was my first kiss, way back! God, it must have been at least a decade ago.”

Charlie’s eyebrows shot up. The lighting was dim behind the venue, but he wondered if his flush was visible. “And uh, yeah, that too.”

“God, yeah, but I haven’t seen you in like, forever. I almost didn’t recognize you!”

He scoffed before he could stop himself. “Haven’t you seen me on the cover of People and Us Weekly? God knows I’ve been on there often enough.”

They looked at each each other blankly, and then turned to him.

“Wait, do you not…”

“We don’t keep up with tabloids,” Taylor confessed. “We find them exploitative-”

“Do you not know who I am?” Uzu hoped he didn’t sound as awed as he felt. “I’m Akechi Incident’s bassist…”

Taylor’s mouth formed a tiny o. Charlie’s jaw dropped. Uzu wanted to be anywhere that wasn’t here.

“...are you two okay?”

Taylor shook his head excitedly. “God, it’s just- I didn’t put two and two together, I’m just a huge Satsuki fan. I don’t really pay attention to anyone else in the- I mean, your band, sorry.”

“Right.” He coughed. “It’s okay, not many people do. She’s pretty stunning.”

They looked like they wanted to say something else, but luckily for him, the door slammed open, and a familiar, angry head of blond hair popped out.

“Uzu, where the fuck are you-”

“I’m here,” he said immediately. “Sorry Shiro, I was just taking a quick smoke break-”

“We’re already setting up, hurry up,” Shiro snapped. “I’d better see you in a minute.”

He turned to look guiltily at the couple standing behind him. “I actually, uh, I’ll go with you, I gotta take a leak-”

“Hurry up, then. We don’t have all day.”

Uzu cleared his throat and tried to speak. The cigarette butt he’d dropped burnt out on the ground beneath them, and he resisted the urge to crush it with the heel of his boot.

“So it was nice seeing you around-”
“Funny running into you here-”

They both stopped. “You first.”

“Great seeing you here, Uzu,” Taylor managed. “Good luck with your show.”

“Same,” he managed. “Hope you have fun. I’ll, uh, see you around.”

Before either of them could say anything else, he raised his hand halfheartedly in a wave and let Shiro grab him by the arm of his jacket and pull him back into the darkness of the hallway inside. The door had barely swung closed behind them before he spoke.

“That was the most awkward goodbye I’ve ever witnessed.”

“Ran into an ex, if you could call him that,” he muttered in response. “Never really fun.”

“My condolences,” Shiro deadpanned. “But I’m sure you’ve got many of those, and as sorry as I am, we’re behind schedule because you had to run out for a nicotine fix.”

“Thanks for rescuing me anyway.”

“My pleasure.”

They slowed as they made their way backstage, flashing their passes at the guards. They were almost past when one of the men in the black polos coughed.

“Iori?”

Shiro turned on his heel. “What is it?”

“We caught some guy trying to get backstage. Said he was Sanageyama’s-”

“Don’t let him in without a pass.” Uzu didn’t hesitate. “Don’t care who they are.”

Shiro’s eyes narrowed at him.

He didn’t bother turning around to look him in the face. “Thought you were the one who said we had to get a move-on, Shiro.”

The footsteps behind him resumed, but the unease didn’t fade away, instead choosing to sit heavy in his gut.

It’d been a long day.

The first time he ever smoked weed was in the gross, dimly-lit basement of a friend whose name he couldn’t remember and who was decidedly impatient with him trying to figure out how this stupid bong worked. In his defense, though, they’d been passing the 40 back and forth for the past half hour and the bottle was almost empty and everything was slower than usual.

“Keep your finger on that little hole. No, don’t put your whole mouth on it, you’re gonna drool- don’t you *dare* cough.”

Even now, he couldn’t remember her name, only that she was older than he was and blonde and a D-cup. Despite her words, he coughed on the smoke. She pulled the bong away from him and clicked the lighter with a perfectly synced motion. Uzu watched in fascination as the water bubbled and the chamber filled with white smoke. Her mouth pinched tight around the hit, and his jaw dropped in awe as she exhaled a perfect, pretty plume of nearly transparent smoke and sighed in irritation.

“Oi. Open your mouth.”

“What-”

She inhaled again over the mouth of the pipe and pulled him forward by the jaw, exhaling into his open mouth. He inhaled out of reflex and felt her smile.

“Whoa.”

“Do I need to do that again, or should I just pack a pipe for you?”

“Uh-”

“Fuck it. Too much work, and I don’t trust you not to drop it.”

“Um-”

But she was inhaling again, and this time when she exhaled into his mouth, lips bumped and he kissed her instead. She tasted like smoke, and didn’t complain when he kissed her a second time, or a third, or when they tumbled onto her floor and his hand hesitated to touch her through her shirt. Something warm closed around his wrist and dragged his hand over onto her chest.

He pulled away, breathless and dizzy and flustered. She blinked slowly at him and smiled.

“Wanna order a pizza? We can continue after.”

Uzu nodded, feeling significantly stupider than he’d meant to feel. She was pretty and soft, and he wanted a glass of water and maybe another kiss.

Later that night, significantly clearer headed, he’d replay the feeling of a boob in his hand over and over again, a little awed. It had been, overall, a nice day, and she’d even done him a favor of rolling him a few joints, neatly hidden in an altoids tin in the back of his underwear drawer.

He could have drifted off to sleep and been happy, the remnants of the THC fading in his system, if it hadn’t been for the door swinging open just as he closed his eyes.

“Uzu.”

The voice was measured and calm, but something ugly hid at the back of it. Eyes snapped back open like a tape measure retracting into its container.

“Dad?”

“What’s this I hear about quitting kendo?”

His heart sunk back down into his stomach. “Well-”

“You’re supposed to be taking your 1-dan this year. Do you know how much this meant to your grandfather?”

“Don’t you mean how much it means to you?”

He wasn’t able to keep the bitterness out of his voice, and his father’s eyes narrowed behind his glasses.

“All this talking back. You’re failing your english and math classes, all you do is come home past your curfew and make your mother go down to your school and get into fights. You smell like cigarette smoke. You’re growing out your hair, and instead of going to tutoring, you play that stupid guitar your brother bought you. I don’t know what he was thinking, he usually has better sense than this.”

He grit his teeth.

“It’s a bass, first of all-”

Sanageyama Sr. cut him off. “I don’t *care*. I want you to stop being such a pain in our throat and maybe try, for once? Would it really be so hard to look up to your brother as an example of what to do as opposed to, perhaps? Could you not be such a disturbance? How many times do we have to ask you to not-”

“Look, I’m sorry I’m a pain in your collective asses, okay? I’m not Ts-”

“You will *watch your mouth*-”

“*NOTHING* I do is good enough for you!” He groaned and rubbed his forehead, mumbling under his breath. “God, fuck this.”

There was a very pointed silence between them as he realized what he’d said, and he barely flinched when his hand caught the side of his face. Teeth grit together to bite back the instinctive sting of tears gathering at the corners of his eyes.

“Maybe I’d acknowledge your efforts if you actually made any,” his father whispered. “It’s really not that difficult to not be a waste of space. You’re almost fourteen now. Grow up.”

The only noise in the room was the creaking of his box spring when he stood up. His father made towards the door, but he was already pulling his jacket off the hook and making his way down the stairs. The irritation in his voice was evident as he called out after him.

“Where are you going at this time?”

“Out.”

“We have to finish talking-”

The door slammed behind him.

If he'd had the time to grab one of those joints he had in that tin, he would have, but instead he sat on the curb in front of the church and thumbed through the cigs in the soft pack and wondered how he'd fork up the money to buy a new pack on Monday. It was starting to get chilly, especially at night, and he resisted the urge to cry when his lighter refused to give him a steady flame. This was a stupid idea. His jacket wasn't doing anything against the wind, his cigarette wouldn't light, and the place where his father had slapped him open handed throbbed red, the warmest part of his body at the moment. He wondered if it'd bruise. Uzu shoved the pack back into his pocket and burrowed his face in his arms, trying his best not to shiver.

"Maybe I am an idiot."

Footsteps brought him out of his funk, and he blearily pulled his head up from where it rested against his knees. A clearly winded middle aged man stood over him, still only dressed in his work clothes. The dress shirt couldn't possibly be doing anything to ward off the cold, and he he didn't so much as shake when he extended his arm.

"Uzu."

Stubbornness was one of his more annoying traits, and he refused to look up.

"It's cold. Let's go home."

A hand pushed his hair back out of his eyes, and it was then he realized there were tear tracks on his face when he looked up at the tired face of his father.

This time, when he reached down for his hand, Uzu took it.

The smack numbed everything, but he hadn't had enough that he couldn't feel hairs part from his scalp when the taller of his two companions in bed pulled his head back. He moaned, more for show than out of actual pleasure. Still, the dual stimulation was definitely doing something for him, as evidenced by the rolling feeling in his gut that told him he wasn't too far off.

This was what he was good at. This was what he was useful for. Here was where he belonged, pinned against sweaty skin and sticky sheets. He wasn't sure of either of their names, only that they were dating each other and open to experimenting with others. Maybe

they were swingers? It didn't matter. He craved the dig of of bodies against his own, and he was certainly no stranger to pleasures of the flesh.

"He's cute," murmured the man whose lap he'd chosen to sit on. He was the taller of the two, and none too gentle- Uzu suspected he'd have bruises on his hips in the morning. "Hey, make some noise."

They chuckled at the strangled gasp he let out. The other one sighed against the sweaty skin between his shoulder and throat and he wrapped his hand loosely around his cock. The rock of their hips was unsteady and uneven, but he couldn't expect much better from the first two people he'd found dealing skag in a fucking bathroom. Beggars couldn't be choosers.

(But was he a beggar?)

Faintly, he wondered if Ira would be mad at him, and the bubble in his gut told him that the high was already dissipating. Desperately, he tried to grab onto the rapidly fading bliss, to no avail. And with his mind clearing came a flood of unwanted thoughts. He wondered between dizzying thrusts and half mumbled swears, what the others were doing.

(Wondered if maybe Taylor was doing the same thing with his boyfriend right now- but no, he'd always been too much of a good kid to do anything of the sort. Normal people didn't usually have threesomes with heroin dealers, at least.)

The guy pounding into him came with a grunt, nothing graceful or romantic unless one counted the nails digging into his hips. Those would leave marks, for sure, but he was practically on the edge now, and he didn't care anymore.

(So close, so close, so close so close so close so close-)

He stifled an obnoxiously loud moan in the crook of the neck of the guy riding him when he climaxed, hands balling the sheets underneath them. This was immediately followed with a sense of regret. There was no way they'd been laundered recently.

The guy in his lap groaned, cock still stiff as he pulled himself off of him, hand encircling himself. "I'm gonna-"

"Watch where you point that, Walt," the other guy managed, but the other guy sighed and spilled over anyway, splattering against the side of his face and lower jaw. Uzu flinched and the other man flinched under his glare.

"I'm not into cumshots, but thanks, I guess."

"Fuck, my bad," the guy breathed. "I just, uh-"

"Whatever."

He was too tired to give a shit. The other two looked at him in a way that could be described as halfway guilty, but his heart rate was slowing down and there was nothing he wanted more than to sleep. Condom rolled off, tied off, maybe he should put his boxers back on before he passed out, but he didn't care enough. The crash came with an incredible exhaustion, and his

orgasm had wiped him out. Hot and sticky meant nothing to him as he keeled over onto the questionably clean sheets and closed his eyes.

He woke up alone, sore, with the remnants of someone else's orgasm on his face, congealed and significantly grosser once completely sober. It would never fail to impress him how completely logic went out the window whenever he was confronted with either sex or illegal substances.

In any case, he had his face to wash, his clothes to find, and a cab to take, because it seemed as if his companions had absconded in the time he'd spent knocked out on a suspiciously stained bed. He groaned and almost ran a hand down his face before he remembered what was on it. That'd been a bad idea, for sure, and now he was probably stranded in the middle of fucking nowhere, with a total stranger's cum on his face.

It took a few false starts to roll out of bed, his muscles remembering what his mind was still figuring out. Why Uzu of three hours ago had thought this was a good idea, Uzu of now had no idea, and a bone to pick with him. His boxers were wadded up in his jeans, but honestly, in the state they were in, it was probably safer to go commando. He gingerly pulled them out of his pants and tossed them into the nearest wastebin. Better safe than sorry.

Okay, now he had to wash his face. It was easier to tell himself to do small, simple things, because his brain and body weren't sufficiently in sync to follow complicated commands. He tugged his jeans over his ass and carefully closed his zip as he stumbled into the bathroom, tap water liquid ice and metallic tasting when he splashed it on his face. He doubted the complimentary hotel bar soap would do much more than give him a rash, but he had to *something* to wash the sweat and regret away.

That amongst other, less savory bodily fluids.

By the time he was done scrubbing his face clean, the eyeliner he secretly applied in his outer corners had run all the way down his face, and he took a hotel towel and dragged it across his face, hoping to get rid of it. To hell with this shithole.

The water in his hair wasn't going to be fun to deal with while he waited for his cab, but he'd deal. His hand reached into his pocket as he slid into his jacket, reaching for his phone. But fingers found only the silk lining and pocket lint there.

There was a beat before he put two and two together and groaned loudly. Desperately, he patted down the inside pockets. There was his wallet, thankfully stashed out of sight, flat from his purchases of the night. A spare condom. The nearly empty pack of Camels. His zippo. No phone. A small, optimistic voice in his head suggested that perhaps he'd merely left it somewhere. The rest of his brain looked at the green LED display of the clock by the bed that read ten to three in the morning and wondered how dead he was. Ira was going to *kill* him.

And it wasn't as if he wasn't *used* to losing his phone, but with his reputation, he seriously doubted it was the physical phone the thieves had wanted. Well, at least TMZ would jump at the chance to do a major segment on him again, and it'd been a while since Perez had talked about him extensively. It was late, and there was only one thing left he could do.

The knife was something he'd bought, duty free, on a whim at the airport, and it served him well when he pried the insole of his boot up. There, hidden out of sight, were several tightly rolled up Bens. No matter where he was, it should be enough to get him back to the hotel, or at least back to Seattle. And at least nobody could accuse him of not being resourceful.

The woman sitting at the front desk cocked an eyebrow at him. Maybe it was because he was clearly coming off something, damp haired, and exhausted, or, more likely, because it was three in the morning in a cheap motel and he was alone.

"Your, uh, companions paid cash and checked out. I was going to send one of the cleaning staff going up to check on you and kick you out soon. We're pay per hour, you know."

"Right." he cleared his throat and tried to smile as innocently as he could. "Could you call me a cab?"

She sighed. "Where to?"

"Uh, how far are we from Seattle?"

This time, she whistled under her breath. "You must have had a really rough night, kid."

"Yeah, I guess. Just call a cab, anyone willing to get me back into the city'll do." He shrugged deeper into his jacket. "I'll be outside, waiting. Thanks for your help."

"Take care of yourself, kid."

Maybe he was more exhausted than he'd realized, because it took all the strength he had to pay the cabbie. The driver gave him a curious look when he handed over the bills, but didn't comment on it, for which he was privately grateful. It was probably incredibly suspicious to be paying cab fare in straight cash in the wee hours of the morning, coming all the way back from a shady motel, shaky and strung out and more than a little peaky, but he didn't care about appearances anymore. All he wanted was a good night's sleep in a bed that didn't still smell like the perfume from the last prostitute that had undercharged for her services, that wasn't much to ask for.

(Not that he was in any position to look down upon anyone in a situation like that, after all. He scoffed privately to himself. At the very least, hypocrisy wasn't one of his faults.)

The parking lot of the hotel was practically deserted. Almost all the windows were dark. It didn't surprise him, though. After all, it was much too late at night (or rather, early Sunday morning) for anyone doing anything reputable to be up and about. That being said, he was in no rush to run upstairs and get chewed out for showing up so late, so it was with some form of resignation that he sat down on the curb and reached for the pitifully empty box of Camels he'd stashed in his jacket.

Around the side of the building, he heard the purr of a motor and the click of shoes. Some late night stragglers, probably. Nothing to worry about. He'd already gone through enough that night to care anymore. If someone jumped him, he'd beat them up. He didn't have anything worth stealing anymore, and he could run, so there was nothing that could scare him. It served as a weird form of insulation from the events of the night. He took another drag and sighed into the cold October air.

The heels clicking alerted him to her presence. He didn't even turn when the light from his cigarette crossed a small shadow, and a voice he knew well spoke to him.

"You okay?"

If he squinted, he could almost make out the concern in her voice. Maybe it was the way his head lolled back that gave him away, but he gave her a pained smile he was sure looked more like a grimace in an attempt to calm her.

"I'm fine," he said, stubbing out the remained of the Camel. "Just a little tired."

"You don't look fine."

There was a gentle brushing noise as she folded her legs beneath her and sat by his side, fabric rustling against his side. Nonon was so small in comparison to him it was almost comedic, all slender limbs and big eyes, halfway lost beneath the folds of her dress. It wasn't covering much, and he averted his eyes from the strip of skin that showed between its hem and the top of her translucent stockings.

The asphalt beneath them was cold to the touch in the early morning chill, but he was still surprised when she leaned into his side, tiny and warm.

"Nonon? You drunk?"

Those damn eyes opened, sweet and overlarge and only a tiny bit shinier than usual. She shivered, teeth clacking with the sudden movement. That tiny jacket she had on was more for show than anything else.

"Not really. Maybe a tad bit tipsy. I had a drink or two, y'know? 'M just cold."

She stretched and let out a yawn, back arching dramatically. He heard a few concerning cracks in rapid succession, and then she slumped against his ribs, boneless. Hastily, he lifted

his arm to wrap it around her, before he had a better idea. Nonon looked at him blearily as he opened up his jacket.

(He couldn't even make eye contact when he spoke, what a hopeless fucking fool he was-)

"I'm warm. And I promise I don't bite."

Nonon deliberated visibly before shrugging into the warmth of his body. He tensed involuntarily- she was cold against the thin cotton of his shirt (and god help him if he was sweating, he'd never hear the end of that complaint), but he wrapped the jacket over her and only briefly hesitated before he wrapped his arm around her, snug and tight.

God, he hoped she couldn't hear his pulse quicken in his chest when she snuggled closer, arms wrapping around him- *to better absorb your warmth, ya damned idiot,* his mind scolded him- but at least she didn't complain when he squeezed her tighter. Then again, she wasn't totally sober...

"You *are* warm."

"Yeah. You know, I'm human, I produce body heat- even someone like me can't fuck that up."

"Sorry I doubted you."

"Nah, that's okay. It's not like I've ever given you- I mean, y'all- a reason to trust me."

She was silent for a long moment before she sighed, low and soft, under her breath. "I'll regret telling you this in the morning, no doubt, but you're not all that bad, Uzu. You're reliable."

He scoffed. "I've never been accused of being reliable before."

"Not in the conventional sense, dumbass," she snapped, and for a moment, everything felt right. "I mean like, the sun shines, grass grows, the sky is blue and birds fly- and you'll find some way to mess things up."

"Thanks."

"But," she continued, "you always try and find some way to cheer people up when you make mistakes. You've always got this sense of... *shit*, I can't think of the word here. You're stupid and self obsessed, you're reckless- but you care. You care a lot." She cleared her throat. "About us. And I guess you can play the bass pretty well too."

"I mean, that's the bare fucking minimum, I'm a bassist. And also not a complete waste of human resources, I hope."

"You know me. I'm an optimist. I like to find a little good in everyone."

"Thanks," he said again, and sighed. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

Nonon shook her head, and he dug his spare hand back into his pocket. There was only one cigarette left in the box, and he clamped down on it with his mouth while he tried to get his lighter to produce a steady flame. The breeze wasn't helping, but he didn't mind- Nonon curled up closer to him in the sudden chill, and he felt his pulse stutter. A stubborn wind blew his hair into his eyes, but he cupped a hand around the sparking wheel and tried again.

It finally flickered to life, and he stuck the tip into the tiny orange flame, the acrid smell of burning tobacco filling his nostrils. The smoke was comforting in the way that warm hugs were supposed to be, and there was nothing more he wanted to do than pull her closer, but instead of slowing down, his heartbeat jumped erratically in his chest. Uzu closed his eyes and took a long drag, hoping the smoke would suffocate him, choke him, at least silence the staccato beat in his ribcage. It did nothing of the sort.

Heroin was supposed to numb you, but even though it'd worn off at this point, there was no reason to be so hypersensitive to everything. The rise and fall of her chest felt like it was echoing through his body, through his arm, every contact like an earthquake.

(And he was very vividly aware of how small she was, and how she fit neatly into the crook of his arm.)

"Can I have a cigarette?"

He nodded without thinking it over, but slowed as he reached into his jacket. "Wait."

"Huh?"

"I'm out."

Uzu opened his hand to show her the soft pack he'd crushed reflexively, and she sighed deeply.

"Shit." She leaned back on to her hands and exhaled slowly. "Nothing?"

"Nothing."

There was a pause between them before she sat back up.

"Wait."

"Huh?"

She pointed at the lit Camel in his hand. "Share that one."

"I-"

Nonon gave him her what he assumed was her best attempt at puppy dog eyes. He bit back the impulse to tell her that shit only worked on Ira, and besides, he was the only one experienced enough to pull it off.

Still, she smiled, gloating silently when he handed over his last precious cancer stick.

"Thanks."

"'S'nothing," he mumbled. "I could probably stand to smoke less anyway."

Her lipstick left prints on the filter, and she grinned triumphantly at him through a mouthful of smoke. He rolled his eyes when she exhaled a perfect smoke ring in his direction.

The moment hung, suspended in time for the briefest of instants, before her smile faded and she shuddered violently. The arm he had wrapped around her waist squeezed tighter, in a vain attempt to warm her up.

"Are you okay?"

“I’m fine, really, it’s just- it’s cold,” she muttered lamely. “These dresses are fun to party in, but they don’t do much for keeping you warm.” As she spoke, she tucked her other arm between her legs, shivering. “Doesn’t help that I’m not wearing panties.”

Maybe another time, he would have reacted, but instead he sighed. “To be fair, I’m lacking in the underwear department myself right now.”

She laughed at that, giggles bubbling deep from her chest. He frowned in confusion.

“That wasn’t funny.”

“I’m not laughing to flatter your ego, dumbass,” she mumbled. “I’m drunk, remember?”

“Go to sleep, Nonon.”

From underneath his arm, he heard her groan in irritation. “You need to sleep too.”

“Yeah, but if I do that, I gotta deal with Ira chewing me out and I really don’t feel like dealing with Mr. Incredible Hulk right now.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have disappeared right after the show, then. What did you even do?”

Uzu stared at the sidewalk. “I have a sinking feeling we’ll all be finding out soon enough.”

“That bad?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you get laid, at least?”

“Yeah.”

“Same.” She stretched beneath his arm and sighed contently, his heartbeat fluttering at the sound. “Also, probably irrelevant, but you do know we asked for Cheetos this morning, not Doritos, right?”

“Aw, shit.” He ruffled his hair and groaned. “I knew I forgot something.”

Nonon hummed under her breath. “It’s cool. Okay, this has been nice, but I’m gonna go up and sleep. It’s really late.”

The cold air touched his skin as she shrugged out from underneath his arm, and they both shivered involuntarily. Hands clasped at her bare arms, and before he could stop himself, he was sliding the heavy leather off his shoulders. She blinked in surprise.

“What are you-”

“Take it.” He extended his arm to shove the jacket at her. “That dress doesn’t cover much. You’ve gotta be freezing.”

There was a brief moment where she hesitated, but then the weight was lifted from his grasp and she slid her arms into the overlarge sleeves. It suited her well. She easily looked better than him in it, at least. At least she seemed to like it- though she seemed a bit flushed. Maybe it was the streetlight reflecting off her hair, but her face looked pinker than usual.

“Thanks for the cigarette. And the jacket. And for talking to me."

"Don't mention it," he muttered. The chill bit at his bare skin, and he grit his teeth to keep them from chattering. "You needed it more."

"Have a good night, okay? Get to bed soon, you've got that photoshoot with Satsuki tomorrow."

"Who are you, Ira?"

She ignored the crack. Instead, she went silent for a few seconds. Uzu frowned.

"Goodnight, Nonon."

"Yeah, you too. And Uzu?"

"Hm?"

He looked up at her, drowning in his jacket. Its size made her look even tinier than she actually was, even at his angle. It wasn’t often he remembered how small she was without the anger surrounding her like a cloud. Heels in one hand, the spare hand holding the leather closed, she could have been any tipsy girl that’d spent all night partying, standing barefoot on the curb.

"It's past midnight, right?”

“Yeah, it’s almost four.”

There was a brief pause, and she crouched awkwardly to throw an arm around his neck. He squeezed her forearm in acknowledgement of the gesture, and felt her smile into his hair.

“Happy birthday.”

He wasn’t sure why the lump in his throat took so long to dissolve, but he had a feeling it had to do with how the wind bit at his skin, and the echo of her footsteps faded into silence. And besides, it was late. He should sleep soon, but instead he sat and waited for the cold to crawl up his spine before he bothered standing up.

For what he knew was not the last time, he was the last person to make it back to his room that night.

The hotel room stairs were easier to navigate without her signature monster heels. Just her luck for the elevators to be out of order- she didn't like stairs sober, much less drunk. Still, she stumbled upwards, stubborn as ever, and determined to make it back in one piece, or at least without tumbling down the stairs.

For some reason, Satsuki didn’t so much as stir when she slipped into the door. Maybe she was fully exhausted, because she’d seemed to have fallen asleep in the middle of work. Tip-toeing carefully, Nonon quietly closed the laptop screen, cutting the screensaver off in the middle of a photo montage of their group selfies. Satsuki murmured something unintelligible in her sleep and curled up tighter around the pillow she had in her grasp, and something tightened around her heart.

Nostalgia was kind of a bitch that way.

She didn’t even twitch when Nonon pulled the covers over her, and the white of the bedspread clashed vividly with the night black of her hair.

Despite her physical exhaustion, however, her mind didn’t seem to be feeling the time of the night, and instead, she cracked open the sliding doors to the balcony and slipped outside. Uzu’s jacket was warm, and still retained his heat. Faintly, she could smell the things that reminded her of him- weed, cigarette smoke, the icy burn of men’s deodorant, still lingering in the lining. It was almost like coming home after a long day.

It was almost absentmindedly that she reached into the inside pocket, not out of anything but simple curiosity, and found something wrapped in a plastic bag. Something she couldn’t explain caught in her throat as she turned out a shiny, brand new package of Camels into her hands, unopened, unwrapped.

Not that it mattered anyway. She preferred Parliaments.

Chapter End Notes

My tumblr's satsukichan, if anyone has any questions!

treat me like your mother

Chapter Summary

You blink when you breathe
And you breathe when you lie
You blink when you lie

Chapter Notes

(I didn't mean to take a four month hiatus, but sometimes it (due to college applications and mental health breaks) happens, and sometimes you end up writing monster chapters out of it (this chapter is 500 words shy of thirty thousand words). For future reference, I'll post all my notes and work in case I do ever abandon this hell fic, but I would announce it beforehand and probably won't ever, as I am still ridiculously enthusiastic about this AU so, yeah. Sorry for the four month delay. Mild warnings for refusal to use proper pronouns.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Satsuki woke up a full three minutes before her alarm.

How nice. Precise, clean, punctual.

Perfect.

The room was significantly cooler than it should have been when she slid out from under the covers, but the sun was already starting to pour into through the windows, and it was much too beautiful for her to care much. Peering over to the other side of the room, the reason for the surprise chill became obvious. Nonon was draped over the side of her bed, still half-dressed and fully made up, her bed closest to the balcony with its sliding doors. They were still cracked open.

Satsuki was careful not to make any noise when she pulled the sheets over her unconscious form. Luckily for her, Nonon was out cold. Hands clenched subconsciously as she did, and she looked on with badly disguised fondness at her best friend.

A knock like a gunshot jolted her out of her momentary peace. Words, muffled by the wood, buzzed behind the door. Still, Satsuki recognized the intonation well enough to know who waited for her.

“Come in,” she called. There was a quiet beep, and then the yellow light from the hallway spilled into the room. Shiro stood in the doorway, paler than usual, phone in his outstretched hand.

“We’ve got trouble.”

Her brow crinkled.

“What kind of trouble?”

His forehead pleated as he tilted the screen towards her. As her eyes registered the images, something akin to deep exhaustion overcame her.

“Goddamnit.”

“I second that sentiment,” Shiro replied. “It’s going to be one hell of a day.”

Her eyes moved longingly towards the bed she’d just crawled out of. A quiet temptation rose in her gut to just climb back in. Under the covers, away from the prying eyes of the media, the paparazzi, the endless questions, the photos, the screaming crowds-

But as she moved towards the relative safety of another hour’s worth of sleep, something let out an earsplitting shriek. The alarm rattled the tiny phone resting on her nightstand, an ugly reminder.

There was no such thing as a break in showbiz.

It would be so easy to make a joke at their expense, but the three youngest members of Freshbloods watched with badly concealed amusement at the scene taking place in the parking lot. Two men clung together, gripping each other, white knuckled and red faced.

However, it was far from a brawl- instead, the mohawked man’s eyes were surprisingly shiny as he clung to the the other. Aikuro sighed and attempted to untangle himself from his boyfriend, but he held on with a vice-like grip.

“At least stay with us until our next show.”

“Tsumugu, dearest, it pains me to say goodbye-”

“You stupid son of a bitch.” Tsumugu’s ugly words were undercut by his grudging refusal to let go of Aikuro. “Don’t come and visit if you’re going to leave so soon.”

“I love you too, okay?”

“Shut up, you goddamn geezer-”

Aikuro took ahold of Tsumugu's face and kissed him, and the other man pulled him closer stubbornly, refusing to loosen his grip on his shirt. Almost as if to spite him, Tsumugu opened his mouth, but Aikuro leaned into the kiss, hands sliding down his well-defined abs. Ryuko resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the fully grown men making out against the gaudiest sports car in the state. Aikuro's taste in rentals was still a bit lacking.

"That's enough, guys," she called, keeping a close eye on how low Aikuro's hands were dropping. "You have a flight to catch, remember?"

Tsumugu let out a hideous noise of protest, but Aikuro gently detangled himself from him. Ryuko watched with a mix of thinly veiled irritation and genuine fondness as he pressed his forehead against Tsumugu's. The red and blue clashed spectacularly.

"I'll visit for your next show. Nevada isn't too bad of a drive, anyway, but I have to go back. We're doing quarter end inventory right now."

"Fuck the inventory."

"Well, we could always-"

"Oi, Mikisugi."

They both turned to her, hands cupped around her mouth.

"What is it?"

"Your flight. You're going to miss it if you keep canoodling."

Aikuro let out a drawn out sigh and turned towards Tsumugu. For a moment, she thought he'd pull away, but instead, he leaned in to kiss him one last time before turning towards the rest of them, arms outstretched.

"Aren't you going to wish me good luck on my flight?"

Mako ran forward and threw her arms around him, beaming all the while.

"Good luck with the inventory and the photoshoots, Aikuro," she chirped, muffled by her face pressed into his chest. "You're gonna kick the other companies' asses."

He looked up expectantly at Ryuko. She rolled her eyes in response.

"I'll write a good review of your latex line on Fetlife, I guess."

"I didn't raise you to be this standoffish, Ryuko."

"You *didn't* raise me."

"You can hug me anyway." he pouted, and she took a halting step forward before grabbing Senketsu by the arm sleeve. Before he could protest, she narrowed her eyes.

“If I gotta hug him, you will too.”

Aikuro ignored their half hearted enthusiasm and pulled them in tighter, side hugs quickly forgotten as the three were squeezed into his chest. The click of a lighter behind them signaled Tsumugu’s growing impatience, and she craned her neck out from Aikuro’s death embrace to look him in the eye.

“You know, you’re welcome to join us.”

“Ugh,” he grumbled, but threw his arms around the other four with a smile anyway.

Sunlight was fully streaming in through the windows when he first heard the noise. Against his better judgement, he cracked an eye open in the direction of the hotel door. The incessant banging was starting to get to him.

After about thirty seconds of vigorous knocking, there was a quiet pause, a muted electronic beeping noise, and the sound of creaky hinges. He groaned and burrowed deeper under the covers, but the intruders were not too keen on letting him sleep.

“Uzu.”

Ira never used that tone unless he was in some serious shit, but for once he had no idea what it could be.

“‘m tired, let me sleep-”

“It’s nine in the morning, A, and B, Satsuki needs to talk to you.”

Uzu peeked out from under his sheets, eyes narrowed.

“...can’t it wait-”

Something fluffy and white and going at approximately fifty miles per hour collided with his head. The force dislodged him out of bed, and he collapsed backwards onto the hotel room rug. He got a view of the familiar black loafers Ira insisted on wearing before his vision did a 360, and suddenly he was dangling what had to be at least six feet off the ground.

“This is kinda precarious,” he managed, but if Ira heard him, he didn’t respond. Nor did he remind him to duck under the doorframe, much to his annoyance. Ira ignored the dull thwack of a head bouncing off the wood and the muttered swear in lieu of continuing. Whatever it was that he’d done, it was serious, if he was willing to risk concussing him.

“Yo, Ira, an explanation would be nice, really-”

He merely grunted in response. Uzu frowned, out of sight of anyone who could see his obvious displeasure, and tried switching tactics.

“How much trouble am I in this time?”

“You’ll see,”

“That bad?”

“You’ll see,” he repeated, in a tone of voice that told him he would most definitely see.

“What are you doing today?”

“You curious?”

Tsumugu was still a little red. It wasn’t like him to be as openly emotional as he’d just been, and the flush on his face showed that regret was beginning to creep in. Aikuro had loudly planted kisses on each of their cheeks, kissed Tsumugu full on the mouth, and driven off with a hand daintily extended out his window, waving goodbye. Tsumugu had been very quiet ever since.

“I’m giving Mako a ride to the mall. You wanna come with?”

“Can’t. I’ve got a hot date.” Ryuko smirked in his direction. “Can’t say the same about you.”

He ignored her tone. “The pink haired chick again?”

“We’re getting lunch.”

"Is that what young'uns nowadays call it?"

"Well, we're probably eating out, so maybe not entirely inaccurate."

"*Ugh.*"

The irritation in Tsumugu's voice was obvious. Ryuko snorted.

"You're only, like, four years older than me. What're you complaining about?"

Tsumugu did not respond. She dug her elbow into his ribs gently, grinning from ear to ear.

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous?”

“I’m not going to be jealous of you when I’ve been in an established relationship for years, y’know.”

"Yeah, and said partner is flying back to LA. It's okay to admit it, y'know."

"Fuck off, brat."

"Fine, jeez," she conceded. “I’m just going to text her and go get ready, alright?”

“... I can’t believe you passed up the chance to say you were going to eat at the Y. Step up your game, Matoi.”

He chuckled at the ineffective swing she took at him, and a hand tousled her hair before she could duck out of his arm’s reach.

“Jerk.”

“Go get dressed for your date, Ryuko.”

Ira plopped Uzu down none too gently into the armchair. This entire series of events was starting to resemble a kidnapping and interrogation scene in a subpar action movie, but instead of some Bruce Willis wannabe, it was his bandmates solemnly looking him dead in the eye. Houka’s laptop glowed blue, unpleasant and sickeningly familiar.

“So, when were you planning on telling us your phone got, ah, ‘lost’ again?”

Oh no.

Shiro looked like he was ready to commit murder. Uzu swallowed thickly and looked into his eyes.

“How bad is it?”

“Well,” Shiro began, “At least your face isn’t in the photos, so we might be able to make a case that they were someone elses, but nobody’s going to buy that, and if we’re gonna be real, it’s almost worse if they aren’t yours-”

“Wait. What photos?”

Everyone winced. Houka folded his fingers together and pressed them to his mouth before he could even look him in the eye.

“Uzu, I didn’t know you had a Prince Albert.”

Ah.

“Oh,” he said.

“‘Oh’ might be a bit of an understatement,” Ira replied grimly. “Not only has the entire internet seen you full-frontal-”

“Well, okay, if we’re gonna be real here, that’s not what’s bothering me. So what if the other half of LA’s seen my dick?”

Very quietly, Nonon let out a deep groan from the back. She hadn’t spoken the entire time he’d been in the room, but the disgust in her expression spoke volumes.

He narrowed his eyes in her direction. “Do you have a problem with the truth, Jakuzure? Or are you particularly pissed about having to see a schlong this early in the day?”

“I wanted to have breakfast, and seeing your dick pics all over twitter before noon is killing my appetite. Sorry for not being thrilled about that.”

“Mn, yeah, I could get how seeing that could make cinnamon rolls difficult to stomach.”

“Ugh, can you go five fucking minutes without being utterly *disgusting?*"

Irritation scratched at his voice. “Look, I’m the one who got my photos leaked-”

“Who cares? It’ll blow over in a few weeks."

“Who pissed in your cheerios this morning?”

“Oi,” Ira interjected. “Cut it out, both of you. We have bigger fish to fry.”

There was a tense pause before Nonon muttered under her breath.

“Can’t say I’m impressed with the size of his fish stick.”

“Oh, grow an inch, will you?” Uzu snapped, rounding on her. “What’s with the prissy attitude today, garden gnome?”

“I could say the same. I’m sure plenty of guys would thank me.”

Houka sucked in a sharp breath behind them. Uzu’s eyes narrowed. “The dick jokes are a low blow.”

“Maybe, not that I can imagine you’d exactly be difficult to blo-”

“Make fun of my size all you want, Jakuzure, but at least I don’t throw myself at the first girl who’ll drop her panties for me-”

“And you call being the town bicycle any less pathetic?”

“Well, I’m the one that can get laid without having to resort to-”

“That’s *enough.*”

Satsuki's voice cut through the escalating noise like a hot knife through butter. Uzu and Nonon immediately backed away from each other, looking very much like guilty children caught stealing from a cookie jar.

"You're acting like squabbling infants, not fully-grown adults. Apologize immediately."

Nonon piped up immediately. "I'm sorry Uzu can't keep his hands off his dick long enough to stay out of the public eye."

"And I'm sorry Nonon's so close to hell, due to being like, two feet tall, that she finds making fun of people's natural endowments irresistible. Also, what's with your fixation with my dick?"

"Apologize to *each other*."

They sighed in unison.

"Sorry I pointed out how small you are."

"Ditto."

"*Anyway.*" Satsuki cut Uzu off before he could retort. "We have to think of a way to deal with this."

Uzu shifted awkwardly in his seat. "Whaddaya mean? They're my pics, some assholes sold them, they're on the internet- what is there to do?"

"Damage control. This throws a wrench into our plans, you know. We're supposed to be in a studio in a few scant hours, and it's really not a good time for another scandal."

"People care less about dude nudes than they do chicks, though. It'll be fine. I'll just make a few self-deprecating tweets. The fans will love it. I'll crack a joke about it next time we go on Ellen-" he shrugged as he spoke. "It'll be fine."

"I know that. That's not what I want to know. How exactly did the photos leak?"

"Ah, well, you know how these things happen…"

Her gaze did not waver as he scratched the back of his neck, eyes flitting around the room. "That's not an answer."

"Er, maybe I made some questionable decisions last night."

"Go on."

"All you guys need to know is this is really, really not the worst case scenario we're looking at. Sure, I mean, it's a bit embarrassing, but…" His voice trailed off. "We'll be fine. I'll take full responsibility, anyway."

Nobody responded. Uzu looked around, the remnants of a grin on his face, before letting himself slump further down into his seat.

“Okay, I’m sorry I fucked up again.”

When Satsuki spoke, her words were measured and her tone calm.

“You keep doing this.”

“Fuck, I know, I know, alright? Are we losing advertisers for this? Are they gonna pull our songs off the radi-”

"Oh, shut the fuck up already, Monkey. We’re all sick of the self pity routine.”

There was an unusual bitter edge to Nonon's voice, one clearly not missed on Uzu. Exasperation morphed into genuine irritation, verging on anger when he responded.

“Hop off my dick, already. You're way too dry to be riding me like this," he bit back. "Don't you have some carpets to munch or something?"

“When the *fuck* did I get on?"

Before Uzu could open his mouth, Satsuki slammed her hand down on the bedside table. Everybody jumped, startled by the suddenness of the sound.

“Shut *up*. Both of you, no speaking unless spoken to from now until this meeting is adjourned."

The sulkiness of their expressions could not have possibly been lost on her, but if there was one thing Satsuki Kiryuin was good at, it was ignoring people when it suited her. Her voice continued, uninterrupted.

“Houka, do some quick PR work, will you? At least, do us the favor of fending off Entourage and National Enquirer for now? My schedule is packed from here until our Vegas show. Completely booked. Shiro's busy too, so if you could take some of his workload off his shoulders, I'm sure he'd appreciate it."

“Consider it done."

“As for the rest of you, mum's the word. No speaking to the press at all. And do try and keep a low profile, they're going to swarm us at the airport and the less I have to stress about between this mess and the shoots today and tomorrow, the better. Understood?"

“Yes, Satsuki."

There was the ineffable charisma that she commanded that made them respond in perfect sync. In another universe, perhaps, she would have commanded armies, had people die for her, even. The voice that could make arenas scream themselves hoarse could launch a thousand ships, like Helen of legends. She was certainly beautiful enough.

But those blue eyes focused on Uzu, and they were cold.

“And you, go make yourself at least decently presentable. There’ll be a lot of photos taken of us today, both in and out of the studio. Steel yourself.”

“Yes, Satsuki.”

“Adjourned,” she said, and rapped on the wood of the headboard for emphasis.

The instant the word was out of Satsuki’s mouth, Nonon stood from where she sat on the bed and made a beeline for the door, face blotchy and eyes dry. She didn’t even pause to make another crack at Uzu before she was out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Not two seconds after the echo stopped vibrating through the room did Uzu jerk a thumb at the door.

“Okay, spill the beans. What’s with her today?”

In response, Houka swiveled his laptop around to showcase his laptop screen. Image after image of the band covered the screen, but the problem was immediately obvious. He wrinkled his nose in distaste.

“Ah.”

Dozens of posts stood out against a blue background, all with similar bolded titles and unpleasant headlines.

“You know, despite all your escapades, you’re still a favorite of the paparazzi,” Houka began. “You’re a troublemaker, but you’ve yet to do anything truly egregious that they’ve been able to document, you smile at the cameras- you’re America’s favorite douchebag.”

“Thanks.”

“Problem children are likeable. Nonon, though…”

Everyone in the room pressed their lips into a thin line in perfect sync. Uzu squinted at the series of text posts with a grimace on his face.

“Between the rumors of her and Satsuki, and- well, let’s just say bandom in general doesn’t seem to take to well to single women in the general vicinity of their favorite members.”

“Wait.” Uzu shook his head like a dog trying to get water out of its ears. “What the fuck is bandom?”

“You know, fans of a band? Fandom? Bandom?” Houka gestured airily with a spare hand. “I keep tabs on them. They’re the people that make us trend on twitter, the people who go to our shows, who make those gifsets and edits and compile our albums on kickasstorrents-”

“Are these the weird people that keep writing stories where the two of us are dating?”

“Bandom seems like something that should be sane and reasonable,” Houka said, as if he hadn’t heard Uzu, “but the amount of people whose reason and sanity seem to fly out the

window when relationships they have nothing to do with come into play is, well, impressive. Half of the Akechi Incident fan community thinks I'm shagging Nonon, the other half thinks you and I are a thing, and they're constantly at war with people who believe you and Satsuki are a thing in secret."

Uzu peered over his shoulder and crinkled his nose in disgust at his screen again.

"Okay, yeah, but what do I care about nerds and their theories? Why are my nudes on some sixteen year old's blog?"

"They tend to be a bit… overzealous."

"I wouldn't stop at overzealous. That seems a bit modest, really."

"Consider yourself lucky. For all the gross attention and showerhead masturbation material you've undoubtedly provided a bunch of horny adolescents, this isn't exactly unexpected of you."

"Well, you know me. I try my best to be the sexual awakening of teens across America. And, hey, my promiscuity works in my favor here. I'm no Ira, after all."

Ira grunted. Uzu ignored the muttered words under his words to look at Houka again. He nodded again.

"And that's my point exactly. You'll be fine."

"Well," Satsuki said, "There was that shoot you did a few years back-"

"My Playgirl shoot wasn't full-frontal, though. Ms. Kiryuin wouldn't allow it."

"Perhaps for the best. But now we've got this on the internet, and we've learned absolutely jack shit from this endeavor, except that you're not Jewish, and-"

"Anyway," Satsuki cut Houka off before he could speak further. "Take your interest in Uzu's genitalia elsewhere, if you please, Inumuta. As for you, Uzu-"

"Yeah?"

"Forgive Nonon, okay? She's had a rough morning on her social media again. I'll talk to her too."

"It's alright. I shouldn't have snapped at her like that, either." Hands braced themselves against the arms of the seat as he stood, classic easygoing grin replacing the stressed expression he'd sported for the entire conversation. "I'll apologize when I next see her."

"Go get dressed, talk less."

"Alright, then." He clapped his hands together loudly and turned on his heel in the same movement. "As much as I'd like to stay and chat, I've got a flight to catch and more rumors to dispel. Or create... it's all in a day's work, really."

“Just please, *please* stop taking photos of your junk,” Shiro grumbled. It was only the second time he’d spoken since they’d entered the room. “I’m going to be swamped for the next month.”

“Well, think of it this way- it was all in the interest of full disclosure.” There was an air of something approaching mockery as he bowed at the waist, hands outstretched in the doorway, grin spreading further. “I’ll see you all later.”

The door swung shut behind him. It wasn’t until Houka groaned that they all turned, confused, to look at him.

“No wonder he was so passive aggressive.”

“What is it?” Shiro asked. Houka only grimaced in reply.

“We forgot something.”

“Oh,” Satsuki murmured. “Is it already…”

“It’s his twenty-third birthday.” Ira said. The dawning horror in his voice was reflected in the suddenly guilty expressions on their faces. “It’s his twenty-third birthday, and I woke him up by calling him a disgrace.”

“Just because he’s managed to live to twenty-three doesn’t make that any less true, though.”

“Yes, Houka, but for your twenty-third we got you a new soundboard, not a meeting with the Inquisition.”

“If you’re so guilty, go get him a gift or something.” Houka leaned forward, chin in hands. “I always get your gifts ahead of time, so that I can make up for not always remembering them right away.”

“What’d you get him, then?”

“Some choice reading material. Nothing too complicated. A new copy of The Ethical Slut, among them.”

“Appropriate, perhaps,” said Shiro.

“Harsh.” Ira stood up. “Satsuki, good luck on your shoot today. Same for you, Shiro.”

“What about you, Ira?” Satsuki crossed her legs as she spoke, leaning back in her seat. “What’ll you do on your day off?”

The mountainous man sighed. “Buy Uzu his birthday present. What else?”

The tiny room had been suffocating. Relief came as soon as she was clear out of earshot, so she could breathe and try and focus her thoughts on things more important than anonymous hate on the internet. Or the genitalia of her band's bassist. Whichever.

(His jacket was still on the floor next to her bed, but she tried not to think about it as she knocked smartly on the room whose number she had written in her own memos.)

A muffled voice called out in response.

"Who is it?"

"Just me."

"Hold on-"

Nonon counted the number of locks that Ryuko had to undo (two, a latch and a chain) before she could open the door. Before she could ask, her hands leapt up, palms open in defense.

"Tsumugu's a paranoid fucker."

"I was about to ask. What'd he do for a living before joining a band, work for the KGB?"

"Roadie. Line cook. Personal trainer. Masseuse. Dog walker. He changes the story every time. He's been fired a lot."

"Huh."

"Come on in, I've gotta get dressed before we can grab lunch, okay?"

"Alright."

Behind the door was something straight out of one of her fantasies. There was something about Ryuko Matoi that made her ridiculously attractive. Maybe it was the fact that she was standing in front of her in nothing but her underwear.

Yeah, that was probably it.

"You wanna sit down?"

Ryuko, Nonon was learning, was not particularly good at picking up on social cues about sex. It didn't help that she could only nod, dumbstruck. Being short had its advantages, being tits-height on most pretty girls being one of them.

"Cool." She paused to cup a hand around her mouth and lean back. "Yo, Mohawk, are you decent? I'm bringing in a lady."

"Yeah, don't worry," a gruff voice called back.

Nonon blinked.

"Wait, you just walk around in your underwear with your guitarist in the room?"

“Huh? You mean Tsumugu?”

“Yeah.”

Ryuko looked a little confused. “Tsumugu’s gay. For all intents and purposes, he might as well be my older brother.”

“Oh, okay.” Relief was probably plastered across her entire face. “I just-”

“Anyway, come on in, don’t just stand in the hallway.” She pulled the door towards her, and Nonon hesitantly followed her in.

For whatever reason, she had expected the room to be less of the dictionary definition of bedlam. Clothes were strewn everywhere, with a nervous looking android in the dead center of the mess, several dresses over each arm. Mankanshoku squinted into a mirror and gestured for another dress instead.

“Yo, Senketsu, toss me my clothes, will ya?”

In retrospect, thinking about how she’d first fucked Ryuko in a club bathroom, this was probably to be expected. A shirtless man towered over her, towel wrapped around his neck, and raised his hand in recognition of her presence. Before she could respond, something smacked her full in the face.

“Thanks, Senketsu.” The fabric obscuring her sight disappeared, and before Nonon could put two and two together, the dress was already being pulled over Ryuko’s head. She tried to comfort herself with the knowledge that she’d be seeing her like that again, and hopefully soon.

“So, what’re everyone else’s plans?” she asked, trying to keep her voice casual. “We’re going to get lunch, but…”

“Tsumugu promised me that he’d take me to the mall if I could beat him at Mario Kart, so,” Mako gestured airly with a spare hand, which was a feat, considering that she was in the process of putting on bright green tights. “Here we are.”

“You had a blue shell, it’s not fair.” Tsumugu emerged from the bathroom again, shirt on this time. “But I’m a man of my word.”

“‘Let me tell you two pieces of information, Mankanshoku. One, I’m going to win this game. Two, you’ll drag me to the mall over my dead body’ my *butt*, you’re all talk and no action. Get better before you try and challenge me.” She stuck her tongue out at him for emphasis and stood. “Right, okay. I’m ready when you are.”

Nonon snorted at her impression of the buff dude rolling his eyes in the mirror.

“I don’t sound that squeaky, runt.”

“Yeah, yeah, getcha butt moving and take me to the mall like you promised.” Mako pulled the clothes off of Senketsu’s arms and dumped them onto the floor instead. “Thanks, buddy.”

“What about you, Senketsu?” Ryuko looked up from her shoes, in the process of lacing them up. “What are you doing today?”

“Well, I-”

“Yeah, no, that’s a good point.” Tsumugu stepped out of the bathroom. “Oi, rustbucket, are you coming along?”

Maybe it was the lighting, but she swore the yellow eyes set into Senketsu’s grey face darkened momentarily.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Or what?” Tsumugu scoffed. “What, is it going to fight me?”

Nonon heard Mako suck in a breath between her teeth in the immediate silence. The room suddenly felt too small to hold all of them at once.

“Yo, guys...” Ryuko began hesitantly, but Senketsu cut her off, eyes narrowed to slits.

“I thought I told you to never call me an it, Tsumugu.”

Mako’s knuckles were chalk white where she kept her death grip on Ryuko’s sleeve. Ryuko’s lips pressed into a tight line.

“You’re not human, are you? Then why should I grace you with the honor of being called a he, or whatever the fuck you wanna be called?”

Senketsu, Houka had informed her, probably didn’t have anything resembling blood vessels in his face, which would allow for flushing. That being said, it didn’t explain why his face darkened so dramatically.

“Well, for one,” Senketsu managed, “Because I would never call you an it, or anything else you didn’t want to be referred to as. You know, I thought you, of all people, would understand that much.”

Perhaps there was something she was missing, because the way they all flinched read like an inside joke she wasn’t in on. In any case, the muscular man’s posture broke for a moment, and he looked like nothing more than a deflated balloon.

“Ride in the back to keep Mako company. Oh, and make sure she doesn’t forget to buckle her seatbelt this time. We don’t want a repeat of last time.” His voice was flat, and he turned sharply on his heel.

“Hey-”

But the door slammed shut behind them, leaving the rest of them awkwardly hovering in what was suddenly a very small hotel suite.

“I’ll meet you in the parking lot, Mako,” Senketsu spoke, finally. “Make sure you don’t leave anything important.”

Ryuko swallowed thickly.

“Senketsu…”

“I’m fine, Ryuko, but I appreciate the concern.” He turned to face them all, stonefaced. “Have a nice lunch. You too, Miss Jakuzure.”

“Nonon’s fine,” she managed, but the door swung closed behind him, leaving the three of them in the room alone.

Silence filled the room until Ryuko let out a very drawn out groan, fingers pinching at the bridge of her nose. “Ugh.”

Pixie Cut sighed, but otherwise seemed remarkably unperturbed by the entire exchange. Nonon watched her out of the corner of her eye as she stretched, hands high over her head. Underneath the pink top, her breasts jiggled. Fate was a funny thing, and Mako Mankanshoku was a painful reminder of how cruel it could be.

Doesn’t matter, her brain scolded her. *You’ve still got hot girls that’ll bang you, any day of the fucking week. Who cares if some nobody underachieving drummer’s got a slamming rack? You’ve still got an ass, AND you can find cute bras in your size, so who gives a fuck-*

Maybe Ryuko was psychic, or perhaps Nonon was simply bad hiding how much she was glaring at Mananshoku’s tits, because she swore that was a wink in her direction. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes back.

As if on cue, Tits McGee reached for the pink purse with accompanying stuffed animals hanging from it and spun on her heel to face them, face split into another sweet smile.

“I’m going downstairs,” she bubbled, as if in reply to Ryuko’s groan. “I’ll see you both around later. Have fun at lunch.”

“Talk to you later, Mako,” Ryuko replied. “and please keep those two from tearing each other apart.”

“Will do, though I’m sure it’ll be easier said than done. Want anything from the mall?”

“Bring me back something from Cinnabon.”

“Love you,” she chirped, and Nonon’s nails dug into her palm when she airily kissed Ryuko’s cheek in front of her.

Maybe she looked angry, because as Mako closed the door behind her, Ryuko arched an eyebrow in her direction.

“What, are you jealous?”

“Huh? N-no, why do you ask…?”

“You’re taking on a lovely shade of puce, right now. Chill. We’ve got a date to take care of.”

“Right.” Nonon flopped back onto the unmade bed, legs swinging beneath her. “I’ll just wait for you to be ready here, okay?”

And maybe she had looked more envious than she’d intended to, because Ryuko paused on her way to the bathroom, and ducked down to press a quick kiss to her mouth.

Sometimes it was worth throwing a miniature tantrum or two, if in the end, she got what she wanted.

Much as Ryuko liked to bitch at him for disrespecting the rustbucket, he had nothing but grudging respect for him. At least he didn’t pull his punches. It was almost… human of him to get as irritated with him as he had today.

He’d regret it, of course. In fact, Tsumugu was already starting to wish he hadn’t just yelled at him. Snapping at Senketsu was just going to make the following few hours just that much more unnecessarily uncomfortable, but he hadn’t been able to resist one more sly dig at him. He’d do it- tolerate his inhuman presence, ignore the weird flickering of his dual eyelids and LCD eyes- for Mako. For Mako. He resisted the urge to groan under his breath as he fumbled in his jacket pockets for the keys, and sighed when the strangled sounding beep echoed through the cavernous underground.

The van gave a disgusting wheeze as he settled into the driver’s seat, cheap foam spewing dust under his weight. Tsumugu patted the dashboard in a show of affection, the way one might pat a horse or a dog they were particularly fond of.

Easy, girl.

And of course, just his fucking luck, when he turned the key in the ignition, the car gave a spectacular splutter and died, just like the rest of his hopes and aspirations.

Unbelievable.

With nobody around to tell him off for it, a long stream of muttered swears spilled from his mouth. The hand that had only seconds ago patted the dashboard slammed against the horn. As if in protest, it let out a strangled sounding honk. He made sure to slam the door to the driver’s seat extra hard as he stepped out, muttering threats all the while.

“Need any help?”

That voice sounded familiar, if not unpleasant. Still, he was wary as he turned to look over his shoulder, and lo and behold, stood one of the few people who, at 6’2, he still had to look

up to in order to look them in the eyes. Ira Gamagoori was two years younger than he was, yet he was over 7 feet tall and awkwardly clutching what looked like a heavily modified Nokia phone in one hand, and a Starbucks drink in the other. If his eyes weren't betraying him, he was also wearing a polo.

Tsumugu's eyebrows knit at the spectacular sight.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I should be fine, it's just my engine-"

Almost as if in response, the car let out an impressive spluttering noise, and smoke spilled out from under the hood. He let out a muffled oath and pried the front up, only to be confronted with billowing clouds of black smoke. The veritable giant looked on impassively as he coughed, eyes watering at the noxious smell of something burning.

"If you don't mind holding my stuff, I can take a look at that."

"Really, I'll be okay," he wheezed out. "Just a little mishap-"

Murphy's law was in full effect today, he noted bitterly. The van backfired, and something sparked, dangerously close to his mohawk. He pulled away immediately, head smacking against the hood with a ringing noise. Pain shot through his skull immediately.

This time, Gamagoori did not ask. The phone and coffee were pressed into his hands with little fanfare and a large, yet surprisingly gentle hand pushed him out of the way. The overlarge man looked at the hissing wreckage of the inside of the car for ten seconds before pulling away and letting out a drawn out whistle.

"How the hell did this thing hold together for so long?"

"Beats me," Tsumugu grunted. "I'm ninety percent sure it's older than I am. Bought it used when I was a teenager, and it already looked like it'd survived world war three."

Ira looked down at him, face grim. "For the love of everything that is good and holy, please don't try driving this on the road."

Eyes narrowed to slits as he sized up the comically oversized guy in the yellow shirt. Yeah, no, he wasn't about to take car advice from some brat that was younger than him, no matter how impressive his biceps. How was he supposed to take anyone seriously if they shopped at Banana Republic?

"Who died and made you the automobile expert?" He spat back, perhaps with more venom than he'd expected. "It's lasted me for ten years, and it'll last another ten if I want it to."

Instead of barking back, however, something that looked suspiciously like amusement crossed the other man's features.

(For whatever reason, Tsumugu suddenly had the very distinct impression that he was about to feel like a total idiot.)

“Oh, nothing. Maybe the fact that I worked for a car repair mechanic for the majority of my adolescent life.” Ira shut the hood of the car for emphasis as he spoke. “Your van is completely dead. You could, of course, gut the entire thing, and rebuild it entirely from the inside, but at this point it’d cost more than just buying a new one. Actually, the fact that you’re still alive is really the most impressive thing. Seriously, this thing is a deathtrap. You’d probably be safer driving fifty tons of TNT on wheels through a minefield.”

His voice was a lot smaller when he responded. “Ah.”

“In the meantime, you could travel with your instruments on one of our tour buses?” He took the coffee and phone from his hands as he spoke, casually drinking from the insulated cup between sentences. “My condolences, though. I assume it meant a lot to you.”

Tsumugu took a long look at the crude paint job on the side of the deceased. ‘Freshbloods’ had been badly lettered on the side of the vehicle the day they’d all decided on the name of their new band by Mako herself, who arguably had the worst handwriting of the four, but the most enthusiasm. The seats were falling apart. The fraying seatbelts didn’t work half the time, and were knotted where they’d resorted to tying them in place. The windshield wipers were falling apart, the dashboard was littered with speeding violations and parking tickets in equal measure. If memory served him correctly, there was a dented half empty soda can underneath the brake and nobody had taken the time in the last two months to remove it so they could properly stop, so they’d instead gotten used to slowing down in advance and using the emergency brakes when absolutely necessary.

And he wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Now that nostalgia came flooding back, he looked helplessly at the monstrous hunk of metal on balding wheels. So what if the windshield was cracked in two places? So what if there were bullet holes in the passenger door on the left side, or that only one of the windows rolled down and the whole thing reeked of gasoline if they drove for too long? Memories of songs drunkenly composed on the sides of roads while they waited for tow trucks came flooding back. He didn’t care about the cigarette burns in the exposed yellow foam, or the eternal stench of beer and weed and dirty laundry.

It was their *home.*

“It’s fine,” he lied. “It was just a shitty old van, anyway.”

If Ira noticed how his voice broke on the last syllable, he didn’t comment on it.

“Okay, cool.” He typed a few numbers onto the Nokia before looking up to meet him. “So should I call the scrap-”

"*No.*"

In response, the giant raised an eyebrow and he cleared his throat brusquely.

“Ahem. I mean, there’s a lot of memories that we- uh, the gang, I guess, have associated with this shitty hunk of scrap metal, you know? If we’re gonna have it taken away, I want us to all

be here."

"Right." The phone was tucked away into his jacket as he spoke, and he straightened up. If there was anything scarier than someone over a foot taller than him being a foot taller than him and built like a brick shithouse, it was the impression of him swelling larger. Ira towered over him.

"So, now what?"

"Eh?"

Ira gestured at the smoking remains of the van. "You were clearly going somewhere before that happened, right?"

Tsumugu opened his mouth to respond, when another, much more familiar voice interrupted his train of thought.

"Ira!"

A small figure bounded out of the shadows, the robot in tow, looking positively sullen in comparison.If he'd thought he looked short in comparison to Gamagoori, Mako looked like something out of a cartoon. From around his waist, she beamed up at him, all bright eyes and white enamel as she hugged him.

"Mankanshoku?"

If his eyes weren't deceiving him, the brown skin of his cheeks flushed red momentarily. A smirk curled up at the edge of Tsumugu's mouth before Senketsu caught his eye, and he immediately scowled. But not even the android could ruin his sudden good mood for long.

"So, big guy, are you gonna drive us or what? Where's your ride?"

Ira turned guiltily towards a pretty pink Cadillac, neatly parked three cars down. If the way Tsumugu's mood dropped could have been physically heard, it would have echoed through the entire underground lot. Mako, on the other hand-

"I call shotgun!"

This time, there was definitely a flush, but Tsumugu's amusement ended as soon as Senketsu sat down next to him in the back. They both looked away as they buckled up, the tires squealing as they pulled out of the parking lot, Mako yelling all the while.

"Hey! Kiryuin, turn over here!"

"Yo, Uzu, are you a grower or a shower?"

“Satsuki, are you okay with a six incher or do you want a full foot long?”

The sunglasses helped conceal her growing irritation, but her mouth stayed firmly shut. Shiro walked to her right, Soroi flanking him, with Uzu to her left. They walked briskly, careful not to take a single step any slower than they absolutely had to, lest they swarm them completely. Even through the din, the metronome click of her heels resonated through the airport halls.

“Hey, are you two together?”

“Have you fucked yet?”

“Oi, Uzu, is she a screamer?”

She could physically feel all three of the men accompanying her tensing. At least their anger provided a shield- Soroi might be able to control himself, but she knew without a single doubt in her mind that if anyone laid a hand on her, between Shiro and Uzu, they wouldn’t be getting out without a bloody nose. If Ira were with them, she’d go so far as to call the coroner. Their concern was touching, but unnecessary.

After all, she was more than perfectly capable of taking care of herself, need the occasion arise.

However, of the three, Uzu’s hackles were visibly raised, shoulders pinching close, hiked up nearly to his ears. Satsuki looped an arm around Uzu’s waist, tugging him closer. In the same movement, she slipped an arm around Shiro’s to hook him closer to her.

“Hey. Don’t react. I’ll be okay. Both of you.”

“Sats, let me go.”

The words were whispered but urgent, and the camera flashes that her Ray-Bans didn’t fully block out increased as he spoke, a brilliant white wall of shouting middle-aged men hoisting cameras over their shoulders.

“Smile for US!”

“Did that piercing hurt?”

“Does she like it in the ass?”

Shiro’s teeth audibly ground against each other. She squeezed both of the boys, muscles tightening under their clothes. One overly eager cameraman approached them out of nowhere, camera pointed at her face.

“Give us a grin, Satsuki-”

“Fuck off,” Uzu barked. A heavy arm looped over her shoulders, middle finger fully extended towards the camera. “Back away, asshole.”

“Big talk for someone with a teeny weenie, Sanageyama!”

“I ain’t takin’ shit from someone who cares this much about another dude’s dick size,” he muttered under his breath. “If I’m not fucking you, what do you care?”

“Easy, Uzu. We’re almost at the car.”

The crowd spilled out of the doors around them, desperate to catch one final glimpse of them before they got behind the privacy of locked doors and tinted windows.

“Turn this way!”

“Aw, c’mon, don’t be such a tightass,”

“Look at the cameras, bitch.”

“Fuck you.” Shiro deadpanned. The doors opened, and the cameras all flashed at once. “Satsuki, mind your coat.”

Perhaps the best thing about autumn weather was the privacy trenchcoats provided her, sweeping fashionably by her knees, and preventing any particularly malicious rabid camera-wielders from getting a shot under her dress. The door slammed shut only moments after she’d gotten clear of it. In the periphery of her vision, she caught Uzu mouthing profanities at the cameras, with a rather rude hand gesture very clearly directed towards them.

It wasn’t until the car began to move that they truly exhaled. She was the first to speak.

“Bags?”

“Already in the back, mila- er, Satsuki. We can have them taken to the hotels, first, if you please-”

“That’ll be excellent, thank you, Soroi.” She resisted the urge to rub her temples at the rapidly fading noise of the obnoxious paparazzi. “More hecklers in that crowd than usual.”

“Do you wish to switch cars, to throw off any persistent ones?”

“Don’t worry, Soroi. I’ll be fine.”

In the dim light of the backseat, Uzu’s phone was particularly bright. He squinted at the screen, face twisted into a frown.

“Are you alright?”

“Hm? No, yeah, just waiting for the inevitable photos tagged at me… there we go. Jesus, I look pale as hell. This lighting ain’t doing shit for me.”

She didn’t bother looking over at his screen. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me, christ. You’re the one they targeted worst today.”

“The perils of fame.”

“The perils of fame, my ass, they’re misogynistic pricks,” Shiro said, blunt as ever. “A whole lot of cu-”

Soroi raised an eyebrow in his direction.

“Sorry, Uncle,” he backtracked. “Er, rude bunch we got today.”

She stared out the window at the streets whizzing by, the desert and sky melding into one as the men in the car murmured amongst themselves, faintly.

It was going to be a long day.

With a girl like Ryuko, it was virtually impossible to tell whether she was hitting on her or simply oblivious to the effect she had on people. Either way, the sweetheart neckline of her dress was doing wonders for her cleavage. Nonon almost didn’t care that she was stealing the bread off her plate without asking first. It took her a minute to swat her hand away and nibble at the complimentary bread instead.

Ryuko, as usual, took offense.

“Hey.”

“You ate all your bread already, you hassle the servers for a refill.” Nonon took a long sip from her wineglass. Pinot grigio. A cheaper end bottle, for sure, but she wasn’t about to shell out more than fifty bucks for wine before two. “Eat your penne puttanesca.”

“It’s linguine alla vodka.”

“Whatever.”

Ryuko narrowed her eyes, but whatever she was thinking of saying, she decided against it. Nonon looked at her from the corner of her eyes as she poured herself another glass of wine.

“Don’t drink too much.”

“What, worried I won’t be able to perform?”

She’d sounded reasonably confident as she spoke, but wilted under Nonon’s gaze.

“Okay, hey. That was, like, one time.”

“I don’t care about your premature ejaculation problems so much as I’m worried about how you might view me.”

“Well,” Ryuko began, gesturing vigorously with her fork “You did say I should take you to dinner first. I’m just going along with what you said, and besides, I don’t have much to do today. It’d be nice to get laid.”

“It’s lunch.”

“Whatever. You’re the horny one.”

“*I’m* the horny one?”

“I can prove it, too.”

“How?”

She shot nervous glances around them. Despite the hour, they’d chosen a relatively secluded spot to eat, and the place was spacious enough that it gave them a two table barrier from the nearest set of patrons. Very quickly, then, she scooted her seat closer to hers, being careful not to drag the wood across the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Oh,” she whispered “You’ll see.”

Something warm rested on her knee. It took her a few seconds to realize it was a hand. Realization of intent sunk in as Ryuko smirked in her direction.

“You’re disgusting,” she muttered. “There’s no need to be lewd in public.”

“Are you complaining?”

It was getting very hard to focus on her ravioli and pesto.

“Is this why you asked me to wear a skirt?”

“Mmn. Maybe.”

The hand fluttering around her knees gently pressed between her thighs, and Nonon watched in awe as she expertly twirled the pasta around her fork with her spare hand. Nothing about her demeanor gave away the slightest hint of what was going on beneath the tablecloth.

“How do you do that?” she breathed. The words hitched in her throat as her hand crawled upwards, dragging slowly across sensitive skin. “I thought you were right handed?”

“‘m ambidextrous,” Ryuko replied through a mouth of pasta. She swallowed thickly, and Nonon resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “It comes in… handy.”

Nonon would have very much groaned out loud if it hadn’t been for the fact that her awful puns were very much accurate- as she spoke, her knuckles brushed against her inner thigh, and she physically tensed. The subtle movement wasn’t lost on Ryuko, who smirked broadly at her. This time, Nonon did not hesitate to groan loudly in her direction.

“I was right. Ass people are definitely barbarians.”

“Maybe,” Ryuko said, chewing all the while. “But you’re the one who’s not wearing panties. It’s noon.” She gestured at the window with her fork, light spilling into the room. “You don’t get to call me a barbarian if you’re that constantly horny. Seriously, do you ever wear underwear?”

She wasn’t sure whether the flush spreading across her cheeks was because of the fingers rubbing against her or Ryuko’s remark.

“This is a tight dress,” she managed. “Nobody’s going to get an underskirt photo of me, one, and two, I’m not a fan of panty lines.”

This time, it was Ryuko who rolled her eyes.

“Ever hear of seamless panties?”

“Have you maybe considered lingerie is not exactly the best topic for polite conversation? At lunch?”

Her only response was to press a finger into her. Nonon immediately inhaled, and regretted it.

“Will you wipe that smug look off your damn face?” she whispered through gritted teeth. “You do not get to look that self-satisfied-”

“So you’re telling me lingerie ain’t polite conversation, but you’re letting me finger you? At lunch?” Ryuko took another bite of her pasta and chewed nonchalantly before swallowing loudly. “I dunno, man.”

Under the table, she casually pressed her thumb against her clit as she spoke, swirling tiny circles around her. Nonon stared dead at her plate, trying to focus.

“You started it,” she retorted, but the effect of her words was heavily compromised by the slight waver she was incapable of keeping out of her voice. This was clearly not lost on Ryuko, who looked very much like a fat cat that had caught a mouse. “Why’re you so knowledgeable about lingerie, anyway?”

She shrugged casually in response, twisting her fork in the mounds of pasta sitting between them on the table. “You learn a lot as a model, I guess?”

“Model?”

“Yep.” She forked another precariously large portion of pasta into her mouth as she spoke. Nonon squinted at her. “I used to model part-time for my cousin’s line when I was in college.”

“Cousin?”

This time, she grimaced. “Technically, second cousin. You know that flamboyant blue haired asshole that our guitarist kept making out with in the parking lot this morning?”

“You’re related?”

“Yeah, through my dad’s side. He runs this… lingerie line. I’m sure you’d know about it if I told you what it was, but, uh, it’s pretty embarrassing.” She shrugged again. “It’s whatever though. Because of the gig, he keeps us hooked up with all the underwear you could possibly imagine. He’s also pretty much the closest thing we have to a legit sponsor.”

“Ah.”

It was easier to keep words to single syllables, because the flush that had blossomed on her cheeks was starting to spread across her body. Heat that had pooled in the pit of her stomach was leeching out towards her extremities, and it took folding her hands above the table to keep herself from clutching the seat. This was not lost on her companion.

“I’ve barely been touching you. Didn’t know you’d be this into it.”

Ryuko’s words should not have been as sexy as they were. This was not a particularly fancy place to have lunch, her breath smelled like cheese and tomato sauce, and in front of her, the fat on her plate was starting to congeal, food untouched. Still, the heat of the whisper raised hairs on the back of her neck, and she tried to hide the way her hands shook as she poked a single ravioli with her fork to raise to her mouth.

“Shut it.”

In response, she crooked a finger inside her, and something resembling a whimper spilled from Nonon’s mouth. Neither of them could be sure, muffled as it was, but it certainly didn’t stop Ryuko from grinning widely. Underneath the tablecloth, she’d stopped trying to pretend, thighs spread shamelessly, as far as they could go.

“Think of this as an apology for the first time in the bathroom,” she said, casually stroking her clit. “I came way too fast that one time. ”

In all honesty, she couldn’t even make fun of her for that anymore. Under the tablecloth, her hips bucked into her hand, and she groaned, face in her hands.

“You're gross,” Nonon managed to gasp out. “You could’ve just eaten me out if you wanted to apologize, you know…”

“I had a hunch you were into semi-public stuff. Guess who’s right.”

“Shut the fuck up…”

The last few words lacked the usual snap of how she would deliver them. This wasn’t lost on Ryuko, who simply smirked in return. To the casual observer, they looked like nothing more than a couple out for a casual lunch, if a bit close together. Nonon chewed thickly, mouth bone dry. She hadn’t expected this to happen, or at least, not yet. Blood boiled beneath her skin, breath rasping out between her teeth as she tried focus on something, anything to keep her from coming too quickly. The musical composition for that pitched up cover she wanted to do? Satsuki’s photoshoot? New shoes?

None of it worked as a distraction. Her mind couldn't hold onto anything, flitting around in her desperate desire to delay her orgasm. Sweat beaded in the bend of her back, and Ryuko was ruthless, she wouldn't stop, wasn't going to stop, she was going to come-

Knuckles were useful, in that they served as the perfect thing to bite down on to stifle the moan she let out when she finally climaxed, body shaking with relief. In the seconds that passed between her shuddering and release, she could almost see Ryuko grinning at her while she still twitching around her fingers. Nonon didn't open her eyes until she was sure it was over, to find the smuggest expression she'd ever seen on a human face.

"Less than six minutes. I checked the clock, too. Go me."

"Fuck you," Nonon hissed back. "Learn some subtlety- you can't just go straight for the clitoris, for fuck's sake."

"Well, we can do more of that later." As she spoke, she reached across to steal another ravioli off her plate. "But first, would you like dessert?"

"Oh, piss off." Under her skirt, she felt her remove her fingers, and shuddered involuntarily. "You're a complete heathen."

"Fine, fine, I'll order myself some tiramisu." Ryuko paused. "Are you gonna finish that, by any chance…"

"Eat it." She stood, tugging at her skirt. "My appetite's gone, and I gotta pee- shit, I left a wet spot."

Ryuko burst out laughing. Maybe it was the wine, or her orgasm, or the fact that half the restaurant was staring at them now, but the flush across her cheeks apparently only made her embarrassment funnier to her as Nonon shoved the seat under the table. She brushed past a confused waitress, muttering about needing the restroom. Eyes lingered on her as she made her way to the back, patrons whispering under their breath (*"Is that-?" "I swear I've seen her before…"*), but she ignored them, exhaling only once she made it past the bathroom door. In the privacy of the ladies' room, she could finally relax. The mirrors showed her what she already knew- she was flushed, sweat beaded on her forehead, makeup smeared ever so slightly. She was a mess. Of course.

There was probably a joke to be made here about her sex life, but for the moment, she let the shudder down her spine run its course, and started looking for paper towels.

He wasn't being paid enough for this.

Shiro had this Same Exact Thought every time he was forced to supervise shoots, but it was never something he got used to. The workers were equal parts starstruck interns with shaking

hands and sweaty palms, and jaded middle aged workers that had worked with everyone from Naomi Campbell to Ragyo Kiryuin herself. Nothing could shock them anymore, not even the youngest Kiryuin and Hollywood's biggest disaster on two legs. Or at least, not normally.

But today everyone was all whispers and side glances and shared phones and wide eyes in their direction, and to hell with his liver, he was taking a double dose of his usual acetaminophen. If he fucked up this one, at least his insurance could cover the replacement.

After all, it was the least REVOCS could do for him, after all the work they'd sucked out of him.

He took another drawn out sip from the third cup of the morning, and eyed the caffeine shot bottles lined up by the makeup artists with something that resembled longing. When this shoot was over, he was going to text Houka, and then sleep like the dead. He'd been up since five in the morning making phone calls, for the love of everything that was holy. It was almost as if they were being incompetent on purpose, and really, he was just one overworked human being. Nobody was supposed to function on three hours of sleep, after all.

As he thought longingly of a comfortable bed, his work phone buzzed obnoxiously. On the lit screen, his reminder to call ahead and make sure the hotel room reservations were in order displayed, along with a new email. Trepidation crawled up his throat as he opened the message.

'Here are the airline tickets for your flight tonight! They moved the video shoot down to Nevada next morning, so you'll be staying in a different hotel and flying in early~

Hope you don't mind the slight inconvenience. Keep up the good work!~<3'

The emailed was signed with her name, as usual, but he closed out of the app and bit his lip instead of looking at it, eyes screwed shut so tightly he could see colorful patterns on the inside of his eyelids. He clutched the phone to his chest and thought of Ragyo Kiryuin, a Mack truck, and a terrible accident, in that order, to keep himself from screaming in white-knuckled frustration.

So much for sleep.

It was at this moment that a voice interrupted his increasingly vivid daydreams of decking a hapless cameraman.

"Mr. Iori?"

"If you're going to ask me about Uzu's photos, I suggest you find the nearest microphone stand and go fuck yourself with it," Shiro deadpanned without turning around. "What the fuck do you want that's important enough to- oh, it's you."

Famed award-winning interviewer Shinjiro Nagita stood, cross armed and shiny eyed behind his glasses. Between his charming, boyish haircut and the blue suit, he looked more like a nervous teenager at prom than one of the industry's most aggressive reporters.

“I’m charmed to talk to you too, sir.”

The sigh in Shiro’s voice must have been obvious, even to to the notoriously tone deaf journalist, because he hesitated when sticking his hand out to shake. Shiro squeezed it grudgingly before dropping it and leaning back onto the counter.

“What brings you here, Nagita?”

He plopped himself down in the seat next to him, and immediately grabbed ahold of one of the caffeine shots. If he caught the way Shiro glared at him as he chugged it, he didn’t make note of it.

“They switched me in last minute, so I’ll be the one talking to them when they’re done shooting. Thought I might drop by to talk to you, real quick, beforehand.” Shinjiro sighed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “It looks like a battlefield in here.”

“It is. But you’d know, I guess.”

“Protesting the injustices of corrupt governments everywhere mostly just got me shot at.” Shinjiro said. “The music industry is brutal, I guess, but it’s mostly bitchy socialites and nasty goings-on in the upper ranks. Hard to phase me when I’ve looked down the barrel of a gun pointed in my face before, though, so they hate me. Really though, I’m impressed that Kiryuin managed to book me. Between the Hakodate-Fukuroda engagement and the announcement of that one idol’s retirement- the blonde one that the hag’s always dragging around- you know the one-”

“I do. And I hate to nitpick, but she’s announced she’s going solo starting in the new year. Totally different than a retirement. Someone of your caliber should know that. If you can’t keep up with the, as you call them, ‘goings-on’ in the business, then you might not be cut out for it. You know, maybe you should go back to undercover investigating, or war journalism.”

“Vanity Fair pays more, and I run a significantly better chance of not being taken prisoner of war by one of the Kardashians than the North Korean government, Shiro.” Nagita brushed off the hostility with an errant wave of the hand. “Like I was saying, I’m booked into the next year. This issue is going to be a hit.”

“Mn.”

“Nothing people like more than a beautiful couple on the cover of-”

Shiro cut him off.

“They’re not together.”

Shinjiro smiled smugly.

“Not officially, you mean? Don’t worry, we’ll play lip service to that, but you have seen the tabloids this morning, right?”

“They can’t possibly be out already-”

Silently, Shinjiro lifted his phone up to Shiro’s face. He stared blankly into the screen before groaning.

“So, the rumors say the nudes were meant for Miss Kiryuin Junior,” he continued ruthlessly. “And the hand holding at the airport? The coat being wrapped around her shoulders? It’s very classic, bad boy and ice queen. They’ll eat it up.”

“They’re just friends, for god’s sake- wait, neither of those things happened, either-”

“Do friends do this?” Nagita shoved the phone further towards him, punctuating the this. “An arm around her shoulder?”

“He was flipping someone off- oh, for fuck’s sake, Shinjiro, don’t fucking do this to me.”

“And her arm around his waist?”

“Don’t you have anyone else to harass, Nagita?”

“Wow, are we no longer on first name basis?”

“Stop the rumor mongering.”

“It’s my literal job, though.”

“You’re a journalist, even if it’s for a trash rag like this.”

“So they’re not together? Are we getting insider knowledge from the usually tightlipped Akechi Incident manager, Shiro Iori himself?”

“Kiryuin will skin me, but, yes, they’re not a couple, they’re not together-”

“Wait.” Nagita started scrolling through his phone furiously. “Lemme pull up Google Docs real quick.”

“God, please don’t do that, at least if you don’t want to write the article about me being found dead in a ditch somewhere. I’m already walking a tightrope with the big Kiryuin by letting this new band Sanageyama liked open for our Seattle shows, and I think they’re going to stay with us for the rest of our US tour. The next three months, I’m going to be kissing ass like crazy.”

“Oh, come on, what’s the worst she can do to you? Overwork you?”

“Have you *seen* me? I’m a walking mess of caffeine and painkillers lately. She’s already got us worn down to the bone, and *they* don’t even have to do paperwork. Don’t manage a band, Shinjiro, if you love yourself.”

“Those are harsh words for your employers, dude.”

Shiro ignored him. “My life would have been so much easier if Purity had showed, but our contract was rendered null and void when they didn’t show up on time, so now our lawyers are handling those negotiations. We’ve got Sanageyama flaunting his junk on the internet, we’re trying to book Hakodate and that one asshole from Liverpool-”

“Takarada?”

“Yeah, him. We’ve got that on our plate- my plate, really- shit, I shouldn’t be telling you this.”

Shinjiro patted his back in a show of comfort, hard enough to knock his glasses an inch down the bridge of his nose. “I’ll do you a solid and keep you off the books, just this once. Someone’s needed to get that off their chest for a while.”

“You have no idea.”

“But you know, you could probably sue them for overworking you like this, Iori,” he said, voice chipper in the way that only well-rested people could speak. “I’d love to cover the story if you did. Maybe in the new year? It’s never too early for a good scandal.”

Shiro let out a humorless laugh. “Sue? The Kiryuins? REVOCS?”

“Yeah, why not? You deserve some sleep every once in a while. I can’t think of any label that treats their managers as poorly as REVOCS does, across the board, and besides, you’re one of the best in the business. I mean, you’re a man of many talents-”

Maybe he caught sight of the ugly expression crossing his face as he spoke, because he faltered.

“Suing isn’t an option.”

“But-”

“The bitch owns our souls, and you can bet your ass that they’re properly notarized too.” He slumped back in his seat as he spoke, arm thrown across his forehead. “You try suing a conglomerate like that, tell me how well it goes. I’m supposed to board a flight to Vegas once this shoot is done, do you have any idea how incredibly *bullshit* this all is?”

For once, it seemed like the bespectacled man was at a loss for words.

“Just please, *please*, write your interview as best you can, so I can get the fuck to my nice hotel and jack off to the thought of getting eight hours of sleep a night, alright?”

The words were more hostile than he’d expected them to sound out loud, but if Shinjiro was offended, he didn’t let it show on his face.

“Good luck. Thanks for the chat.”

“Off the books, Shinj,” Shiro warned. “You promised.”

“I know, I know.” There was another mildly condescending pat on the shoulder, but before he could protest, he’d walked off. “Talk to you later, Iori.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Forget this. Forget everything. With Ragyo running him ragged, he was going to make the best of his night. He swiped to the messaging app on his phone, and typed out a short message.

‘Houka, reschedule our date to tonight. Nine PM, on Skype. See you there.’

It wasn’t until the text sent that he realized how very much everything he wrote was starting to sound like a business email, and he let a groan escape his throat, louder than was perhaps socially acceptable. As his phone buzzed with Houka’s smug reply, he broke the seal on the first of the caffeine shots of the morning.

And the way things were going for him today, probably not his last, either.

“You’re not a particularly good driver, are you, Mr. Gamagoori?”

They narrowly avoided rear-ending the Toyota Camry in front of them as they pulled into the parking lot. Their driver sighed deeply.

“Just Gamagoori is fine, Mankanshoku.”

“You didn’t answer my question. And just call me Mako, okay?”

Ira grumbled. Mako hummed to herself tunelessly, almost in response. Senketsu extricated himself from his seatbelt, being extremely careful not to touch Tsumugu, who was already grumpier than usual from having to listen to Mako sing along to the radio, off-key, for the last fifteen minutes. Personally, he hadn’t found it too grating, but his companions seemed to disagree.

Humans were an odd bunch, even if he was supposed to mimic them in behavior and appearance.

This sense of confusion followed him into the shopping mall. There were always eyes focused on him, odd, intrusive questions (*“Are those implants?” “Sick eye tats, dude,” “Whoa, are you an android?” “Do you follow that one android weather woman?”*) asked, and weird looks directed at him by the nosy types that lacked the guts to actually ask him anything. And then of course, there was the occasional asshole who would make fun of his skirts and let their voices take on mocking, if not disgusted, tones. Not unusually, only after he’d spoken. After all, friendly interface, gender neutral androids were always subject to shit. Recently, he’d started having fun switching between voice presets to fuck with particularly unpleasant people, but, with his current company, that seemed… unwise, at best. In any case,

Senketsu was not unused to attention, wanted or otherwise, but at least people usually tried to be subtle. Mako walked ahead of them, seemingly oblivious to the amount of people openly gawking at them.

It probably had something to do with the fact that he was surrounded by what had to be the most unlikely ensemble this poor Washington mall had ever seen. A tiny, perky twenty-something with a bleached pixie cut and an outfit to rival Peter Pan, two large, muscular, intimidating men (one with a mohawk that made him look more akin to a rooster than a rock band guitarist, the other the size of a basketball player on steroids)- and then there was him, a tiny, vaguely alien looking android in a Japanese schoolgirl uniform.

Honestly, at this point, he couldn't even blame them for staring.

But while being the center of attention was not something that usually bothered him, today it felt a little strange. For one, usually, Ryuko was with him, and his fingers twitched involuntarily, hoping she was alright. Built deep into his code was the programming that made her defense and safety an absolute priority, and although his organic brain gave him free will, the digital parts of him still tugged at his mind. Still, she wasn't with them at the moment, so the only alternative was to protect the closest thing he had to Ryuko right now.

Mako had been carrying on an extremely one-sided conversation with Gamagoori since they'd got here, seemingly oblivious to how utterly stunned he was at her entire being. Carefully, Senketsu flanked her, eye sizing up the mountainous man and wondering what the odds were that he could take him in a fight, if necessary. The odds seemed to lean in his favor, but it was probably irrelevant- there was nothing but awe in Gamagoori's eyes.

"...and if we're gonna be totally real with ourselves, there's like, no way they could have survived that many cops gunning for them, but it's an incredible movie anyway, and we should watch it together sometime- can't believe you've never seen it."

"You just spoiled the entire ending for me."

"Crap, you're right."

"But honestly, Mankanshoku, your explanation was so incredibly vague, I don't think it really matters that you told me the ending. I'd be glad to watch it with you, then? Sometime?"

"The sequel's out in theaters in a week, we can do both, if you'd like?"

"That could be fun, actually…"

Well, they seemed to be getting along alright. His eye trailed up to look at Tsumugu, who was stubbornly refusing to look at him after their spat.

What a brat.

He kept up his side glare through four different stores and nearly three hundred dollars worth of pink and lace, with only occasional interruptions when serving as Mako's personal coat

hanger. After what felt like fifty identical frilly rompers, she excused herself to run into a Claire's, bags shoved into his arms to wait for her return. Ira was dragged along by the hand into the store, leaving the two of them alone.

He wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of acknowledging his presence.

The bags between his knees were piled high with clothes he had no doubt Mako would encourage him to try on, and amidst the whole mess were a few pieces Mako had wheedled him into accepting. It wasn't until he pulled on the cardigan she'd told him matched his seifuku that Tsumugu finally broke.

"Oi. You."

Tsumugu sat heavily by his side, rattling the rickety bench as he did so. Senketsu kept his eye trained on him, but his voice was ice. He wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of forgiving him just yet.

"Yes, me. What about it?"

"Listen." Tsumugu turned away, eyes tracing the tiled patterns of the mall floor. "What I said earlier- that was fucked up. I'll admit it."

"Yes, it was."

"Do you know why I agreed to take Mako to the mall?" His fingers twitched, almost as if he were pantomiming flicking a lighter. "Besides her wanting to drive around."

"She beat you at Mario Kart. It was an exchange."

"D'you really think any of us could beat her at Mario Kart? If I'd wanted to win, I'd have played Brawl instead." Tsumugu tapped his fingers on his knee and sighed. "I messed up last night."

"What do you mean?"

"Called her a girl. Don't think she noticed, but…" His voice trailed off, nails digging into his jeans. "It only felt right to treat the kid to a day out, after that. There are two things I can't stand. One, I hate being disrespectful, especially towards people like her that don't deserve it. Two, I don't like owing people in any way. That's why I'm here to apologize."

"Huh. With how rude you are all the time, I wouldn't have guessed."

"Bite me. Don't know why I'm telling you of all people this, but… I'm sorry about earlier, really. It was a dick move."

"...you know, if you keep this up, one day Ryuko and Mako might put two and two together and realize you care about them."

Tsumugu blinked in surprise before letting out a chuckle under his breath.

“Look, if I didn’t give a shit about those brats, do you really think I’d have let them drag me along on this shitshow? Y’know, we’re probably going to end up going on this whole entire US tour with these assholes, the way things are going. Without a van, there’s not much we can do to turn them down.”

“Well, *your* pride would sooner have us on the streets. Dr. Matoi’s trust fund and Mr. Mikisugi’s generosity can only go so far.”

“Maybe if it were just me, but Ryuko seems to be dead set on this, and it’s thanks to her that we’re even together. Call it fate, or whatever.”

“That’s surprisingly sappy for some hardboiled punk.”

“Ah, shut it. I’m here to apologize, not to become your best friend.”

Before Senketsu could reply, however, there was a bright flash of color at the corner of his vision and a lot of jangling. Mako stretched an arm in his direction with a bag in tow, pink bows overflowing from the plastic.

“You have no idea how many smiley face earrings they have- hey, Senketsu, do you think we could pierce your ears?”

“I don’t think my body will take too kindly to foreign objects in it.”

“Ira looks cute with them,” she pouted, and Senketsu had Isshin Matoi to thank for the programming that allowed him to keep a relatively straight face at the sight of a seven foot plus man with tiny emoticons dangling from his earlobes. “What do you think, Tsumugu? Wanna try out the heart shaped ones? You already have piercings, right?”

The man opened his mouth, presumably to laugh, but he caught the narrowing of Senketsu’s eye, perhaps, and winced.

“Sure, I guess.”

The only thing odder, Senketsu learned then, than an android in a seifuku, a Peter Pan look alike, and two large buff men accompanying them, was an android in a seifuku, a Peter Pan look alike, and two large buff men with cute earrings gruffly flanking them like bookends.

He *really* couldn’t blame the crowds for staring.

There had to be an award for keeping ones hands to oneself when she was as turned on as she was. Nonon’s fingers seemed to keep playing with the hem of her skirt back and forth, until she could feel tights clinging to her and took them off as gracefully as she could, given her place in the backseat of a cab. With the divider down, there was no way they could get away

with anything, anyway, and besides, she couldn't think of many things tackier than fucking in a taxi.

Not that she wasn't currently very, very tempted.

The fare was paid, the tip almost tossed at their driver as they got out, and miraculously, they managed to keep their clothes on in the elevator, if only just barely.

Her mouth found Nonon's as they stumbled back into her hotel room. It was a more significant feat than one would expect, given their height difference of over half a foot, but once accomplished, everything else seemed to fall into place. The sun streamed in through the balcony as she helped the smaller woman out of her dress, pulled the pins from her hair, kissed her throat until she melted in her arms. Heels were stepped out of, garterbelts undone, but she stopped Nonon's hands as she reached down to peel the stockings off.

"Leave those on," she breathed, and kissed her again. The hands that had been at her own thighs reached towards her hips to tug off her panties, and she tilted forward to make it easier for Nonon, pressing against her. The cotton bagged at her knees, and she pulled away, just long enough to remove the offending scrap of clothing.

If there was one thing she was, it was eager, for sure, but there was no way Ryuko was complaining. After all, it was definitely one thing they both had in common at the time.

"My bra," Nonon gasped. "Please get it off. Now."

She'd always been a sucker for girls bossing her around, but that wasn't the sort of information one divulged to girls like Nonon Jakuzure. "Did you say something?"

"Oh, fuck you, you heard me."

"Mn, no." She pushed the hair concealing the soft skin of her throat aside with her nose and hummed, ignoring the stifled giggles Nonon let slip. "What do you want me to do?"

"Please help me out of this goddamn titty cage contraption, holy shit, you goddamned brat." She punctuated her words with gentle smacks on her back, groaning all the while. "But keep kissing me there."

"Say it nice." Her tongue dragged up towards her jaw, and she got the satisfaction of seeing her shiver. Nipples poked through the thin fabric of her bra, and she traced a finger around one lazily, relishing the whine in the back of Nonon's throat.

"Take it off, pretty please, fuck me into the mattress-"

"I said nice, not lewd, Jesus."

"You complaining?" Nonon arched her back to make it easier for her to reach behind her. "Thought it'd be the kind of thing you'd like to make good on."

"Nah." Ryuko unhooked the offending piece of cloth from around her chest and immediately headed south, mouth leaving a thin trail of spit as she kissed lower. "I can do lewd."

Ryuko had always liked sex. Sex was easy, sex was comforting, sex was fun. When she was in the mood, it was almost a pastime, and when it was with girls like her, it became something verging on a hobby. All in all, sex sober with Nonon was an entirely different ballgame, and she breathed prayers against her skin. Hips bucked up to meet her thigh, hands tracing circles lower and lower on the skin of her stomach, so that she moaned when she closed her mouth over a breast.

“Suck harder.”

“Mmn.” Her hands dropped lower, but before she could make her way between her legs, she paused. Ryuko’s head popped up, leaving a wet mouth print on Nonon’s nipple as she scanned the room.

Nonon wasn’t happy with that, to say the least.

“What the fuck are you doing-”

“How do you feel about toys?”

“Wait, toys? What kind?” Hair slid off her shoulders as she scrambled back up onto her elbows. “I mean, I’ll try anything once-”

“Dunno about you, but I’m not in the mood to get fancy.” A lean to the left gave her enough momentum to roll off of Nonon, who squinted suspiciously at her.

“What are you thinking of- oh, jeez, Matoi, where's your chill?"

Ryuko proudly produced a Hitachi from the depths of a ratty duffel bag.

“Like I said, not super fancy, but, you know how it is."

"You clearly have no idea what the words 'subtle' or 'smooth' are. Also, I hope that's clean."

Maybe the look of sheer offense was less restrained than she'd thought, because Nonon immediately backtracked. "I mean, it's an efficient way of getting off, but, like-"

"Less talking, more coming, and yes, I do clean my sex toys. I'm no goddamn caveman."

“So, like, are you just gonna shove it down there, or-"

A few seconds of rummaging produced an intimidating piece of smooth silicone. She took a silent glee in watching Nonon's throat bob ever so slightly as she swallowed.

“Pardon my french, but what the fuck is that, and where are you sticking it?"

“Yo, Nonon." Ryuko waggled her eyebrows threateningly. "You ever had a g-spot orgasm?"

“Like you could find it, miss two minute miracle."

"Listen, you can call me a minute man all you want if you can last more than three minutes with this baby."

“Easy."

“If you don't, I'll call you a one minute wonder until your ears bleed."

“Bring it."

The silicone made a soft suctioning noise when she managed to get the toy to stay in place on the head of the so-called personal massager. Nonon raised an eyebrow at what was suddenly a significantly more threatening sex toy. There were two prongs- one curved and clearly meant to be inserted, and a shorter one she was guessing would make short work of of her climax. Clitoral orgasms were her weak spot- she'd never been good at holding out with direct stimulation.

Ryuko was glad she wasn’t going to be on the receiving end of this monster.

At least *this* time she was going slow. Hands slid down her sides to rest at Nonon’s waist, and a thigh planted itself between her legs firmly enough to dent the mattress beneath them. A hot mouth ghosted down the side of her neck to nip at her collarbones, still bruised the unmistakable red-purple of a hickey. Nonon hummed into the air and let her eyelids droop closed, clearly relishing the ticklish sensation of fingertips skimming across her skin. Accusations of barbarism aside, she’d take no prisoners- if Nonon was determined to peg her as a bad lover, she had no other choice but to prove her wrong.

There had to be *some* reason besides her rack that she was willing to fuck her, though, so she wasn’t about to concern herself too much.

Nonon was wet enough from their taxi cab teasing that inserting the prongs was easy. Still, her hips jerked when she turned on the switch, bucking up into a strangled sounding moan that made it impossible not to smirk at her. Any words that she’d wanted to say had clearly melted away, so instead of listening to her babble incoherently, she pressed the vibrator against her and let her lips drag at her neck. Her thighs squeezed at the arm holding the wand in place, gasping for breath in a way she knew Nonon would make her pay for, somehow. A shaky hand grabbed at her shoulder, as if to pull her closer, and when she looked down, Nonon’s eyes were glazed over, face blotchy and flushed red.

Almost lazily, she stuck her tongue out at her.

The hand on Ryuko’s shoulder pulled at her more insistently, lips pressed tightly together in a half-hearted attempt to stifle herself, and she grinned, leaned in to kiss her, wet. Nonon was needy, and weak, and when she ground herself against the head of the Hitachi she knew she was close. Every single muscle in her body seemed to clench up tightly, nails digging into the meat of her arm, and she exhaled a moan into her mouth, twitching as Ryuko switched off the wand and pulled it free.

It took her a good minute before she was able to speak again.

“How long was tha- actually, don’t you dare tell me.”

Her facial expression could have cowed almost anyone, but Ryuko had made her come twice in the last hour, and self-satisfaction allowed her to see past the faux anger to the embarrassment she was clearly desperate to hide.

“Let’s see.” Ryuko peeked over to look at the clock on the nightstand. “That was about f- stop *HITTING ME*-”

Nonon had grabbed ahold of a pillow and whacked her, none too gently, over the head with it. She rolled her eyes and grabbed at her shoulders, the momentum of their movement flipping them over backwards. Needless to say, Nonon looked significantly more smug from her spot on top of her.

“Oh no,” Ryuko said flatly. “I’m trapped by all eighty pounds of pure hatred and public orgasms that is Nonon Jakuzure, send help.”

“Fuck you.”

“Well, yes, that’d be nice, get on with it already.”

“You know what I meant, new girl.” Nonon’s hands slid down her torso, overwarm from the blood still rushing through her veins. “I’m getting to it. You have any dams?”

“Bag on your side of the bed, top zipper.”

Her upper thighs were already damp when she peeled them apart, and Nonon murmured something she didn’t catch as her mouth trailed down between her legs.

Not that it really mattered, anyway.

Ryuko wove a hand into her hair lazily and let her spine loosen, draping herself bonelessly against the cloud-like arrangement of pillows. Nonon dragged her tongue up against her, flat and slow and long, only to flick her tongue when she reached the top.

To distract herself, thoughts of song composure streamed through her mind. There were a few pieces she had yet to tie together, setlists to rearrange, covers she'd been planning to do. If they, in fact, decided to stay on tour past Seattle, they'd have to shake up their routine somewhat. It was a matter of simply talking to the others, provided they were ok with it, in good spirits and on speaking terms with each other.

As she pondered the statistical probability of getting Senketsu and Tsumugu to collaborate for more than an hour at a time, Nonon's lips suctioned around her, latex molding to her perfectly, and any attempts at distracting herself went out the window. Fingers curved up into her under the dam, seeking out the sweet spot that would make her toes curl, and when they did, she gasped involuntarily. Ryuko could quite literally feel Nonon smirking against her.

“Having fun?"

“You have better things to do with your tongue than make fun of me, Jakuzure."

“That is true, minute maid," Nonon said, and went back to work before she could retort, humming a vaguely familiar song Ryuko was sure she'd caught on the radio once or twice.

It wasn't until she was actually clutching at the sheets, hips rolling into the pressure of Nonon's tongue that she spoke again.

“Matoi, I thought you were supposed to be quick.”

“Can you *please* not stop? I’m building.”

“My jaw hurts.”

“Oh, come on, dude…”

Despite her weak protests, Nonon sat back on her heels.

“There’s something I want to try,” she said, casually ignoring Ryuko’s groans. “Do you mind?”

“Will I get to come?”

“Yeah. Do you have a strap-on?”

There was a long paused before she was able to respond properly.

“Same bag, wrapped in the Freshbloods shirt. The harness is attached to it too.”

“How many Freshbloods shirts do you own?”

“Does it really matter that much right now?”

“Alright, alright, I’m getting to it.”

Her eyes lingered on her tits to keep herself excited as Nonon fumbled with the straps and a stray condom, and it was a damn relief when the silicone and latex aligned itself by her entrance. Nonon eased her way inside in the way only someone experienced could, painlessly pressing up against her until she was hilt deep. Ryuko exhaled, unclenching the fingers she’d dug into the mattress, and waited until her body was used to the fullness before nodding.

Hips rocked into her slowly as they both adjusted to their new roles. The harness was one thing, but the aesthetic of Nonon’s stockings sliding down her thighs as she fucked her suited her more than she was willing to let on. Almost as if on cue, she tilted her head back to let Nonon bite at her neck.

“Mmn.”

There was something about phallic sex toys and Jakuzure that suited her, much like the lingerie littering the floor and the luminescent blush she sported as the blood flowed up under the surface of her skin. Toes curled under the repeated thrusts that she aimed with the precision that could only come from extensive practice. As Ryuko’s climax pooled in the pit

of her stomach, she dug her nails into Jakuzure's hips and very faintly, in the back of her mind, she knew the wetness against her collarbones was drool leaking from the corner of her mouth when she moaned. The harness had a clitoral attachment, and this time when Nonon gasped out her name against her skin, she couldn't even make fun of her. Ryuko's body twitched underneath Nonon as she came, shuddering out a vague and blasphemous approximation of her name and those of religious deities.

Later, she had no idea how she managed to get herself upright, when there was so much blood pounding in her head and, well, general genital area. Still, the dizziness subsided as she breathed deeper, oxygen filling her lungs like the hissed swears she'd whispered mid coitus had filled her mouth. It was nice to breathe properly again.

"So, like, do you do that often?" she asked. Nonon raised an eyebrow, hand frozen around the buckles at her hips.

"What, fuck girls like that?"

"More generally, but I mean, wear a strap-on. You ever pegged a dude? Like, one with a prostate?"

"Not a cis dude, nah."

"...do you like dudes, or…?"

Nonon paused for a long moment before shrugging. "For all intents and purposes, I just ID as gay. It's easier."

"Have you ever…?"

"A few times. I mostly stick with girls."

"You do this a lot?"

"Yeah."

"You get around, don't you?"

The words were not an accusation, but a statement. Nonon nodded in response. Ryuko backtracked immediately, anyway.

"I don't mean that in a bad way. I mean, you're good at this- I mean, there's nothing wrong with promiscuity, so long as you're safe-"

"It's okay. I'm not offended. I sleep around a lot, I guess." She paused. "Well, I guess your mileage might vary. I'm definitely not the one getting the most ass in Akechi Incident."

They both snorted.

"Next to someone like him, I'm sure we all look positively Puritanical in comparison, though, so that doesn't count." Ryuko hesitated before speaking again. "What I mean is, why

don’t you get more shit for it? I mean, it’s good that you don’t have the tabloids shitting on your life 24/7, but like-”

“You’re asking me why I don’t have my name branded across every magazine in the country every time I fuck someone?”

“Well-”

“Two reasons.” She lifted her index finger. “One, you would not believe the amount of influence Satsuki’s mom has on the press, or the amount of shit we’ve gotten away with and managed to cover up. I think short of, like, burning down a concert hall, we could probably hush up a lot of stuff. If we’re gonna be real, it’s kind of terrifying. Nothing gets printed that Ragyo Kiryuin does not want printed about us.”

Something in Ryuko’s expression changed as Nonon spoke, but she ignored the subtle movement. “Uh-huh.”

“Two, and probably more important, if we’re gonna be real, is who I choose to fuck.”

“Huh?”

Try as she might to avoid it, bitterness crept into Nonon’s voice. “Most of those people are girls.”

Understanding flickered across Ryuko’s face. “Ah.”

“I sure do have a lot of gal pals, don’t I?” The laugh she let out was borderline derisive. “Funny, isn’t it?”

“Sorry,” Ryuko mumbled. “I, uh, haven’t had the same experiences, clearly, but..”

“Yeah. No. It’s okay.”

Silence collected in the air as they laid still, heart rates slowing, chests no longer heaving from physical exertion. The sweat cooled on her skin, and she had to resist the urge to reach for the sheets they’d managed to knock on the floor. Would she want to cuddle if she went under the covers? When would Mako and company be back? How long did she have before she had to be decent again? The awkward part of a midday romp was the inevitable ‘so… what do you wanna do?’ questions, asked post-coitus. Back when she’d dated people more frequently, she could always kick them out or crash at their place. Maybe watch a movie or something.

That was no longer an option.

Before she could say anything, however, Nonon spoke.

“I know it’s soon,” she said, hesitantly. “Like, I know it’s only been a few days, believe me. And I know it’s a big thing to ask, but, would you mind if this became a regular thing?”

Dread thumped deep in Ryuko’s chest.

“How so?”

“Like-” She gestured vaguely with both hands as she spoke, flailing them around nervously. “Just a casual sex thing. You and I?”

Unease flickered through her head, but then her eyes trailed down her body. The bruises she’d left on her hips were starting to bloom blue and purple, dark against pale skin, and instead of responding, she leaned over, mouth open to press kisses against them. She twitched beneath her in response, but the restrained giggles melted away into something a little less innocent as her mouth dropped lower.

When Nonon’s fingers curled in her hair, she knew her answer had been understood.

They stepped over discarded clothes, no doubt new and extremely expensive, as they made their way under the lights. He groaned when she climbed on top him, bodies flush against each other, and they instinctively rocked together, trying to balance. God knew she had to trust him enough to entrust herself to him, all of her body weight entirely in his arms now. She could feel him trembling.

This was always the worst part.

Satsuki shifted in his grasp and felt him exhale just a little bit deeper against her throat. Goosebumps peppered her skin, and she shivered. Fingers dug deeper into her thighs, holding her closer, and she tightened her grip on his shoulders.

She wasn’t sure how much longer she could hold on.

“Just a little bit longer,” Uzu murmured into the shell of her ear. “And when it’s all done, I promise I won’t drop you, okay?”

Her response was quick and jerky, a silent bob of her head, but he let out a moan that sounded almost pained instead. God, this hurt, muscles stretched taut, legs clasped tight around his waist, trying to keep her gaze sultry, but the way he was shaking, she knew neither of them would be able to last much longer.

“I’m… fuck, I can’t-”

Promise or no, Uzu dropped her unceremoniously and she stumbled back on the monstrously tall stilettos she was still adjusting to. Satsuki’s dress rode up her hips as she tried to collect herself, and narrowly avoided backing into a light fixture. Behind her, she could hear him wheezing from exertion.

Shiro was over between them before either of them could call for him, eyes narrowed and frown set in his face as usual, but he handed them bottles of water silently. She unscrewed the

top to take a sip as Uzu poured half of its contents into his mouth, only spilling a few drops down the front of his Prada suit.

They both winced.

“Look, this pose isn’t working out for us, okay? Can we just go with the original idea of her stepping on me? Nobody’s gonna buy this crappy romance cover lookalike bullshit.” He rubbed the back of his neck and groaned. “How does anyone hold that pose?”

A small swarm of tittering stylists enveloped them, handkerchiefs held at the ready. Satsuki rubbed the back of her calves where she’d taken most of the impact from her fall.

“Do be careful next time, Mr. Sanageyama,” one of the stylists tittered. “Those shoes are worth nearly half what we spent on your entire wardrobe for this shoot. Don’t drop Ms. Kiryuin if you can help it.”

“Sory. Hey, I liked the throne idea we had going for this shoot, can we go back to that?”

“Let me talk to the photographers, alright? We’ll need different lighting, too…”

She resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose, for fear of mussing her makeup. Under this much stress, it felt like a Herculean feat.

Cameras flashing incessantly.

That was what her work entailed, eyes dark, looking into the cameras, hoping they could feel the burn behind her retinas, hoping that the lens would melt with the intensity of her gaze. Childish thoughts like those never came to fruition, of course. She was only human, after all. But there was only so much draping across furniture and tilting of her head, shifting of her hips that she could take in a day, even after years of practice pretending it was effortless. She smiled when they asked her to, didn’t when they didn’t. and when they killed the lights and called it a wrap, she was the first to shuck off the custom Louboutins and hobble over to the refreshments table. Shiro looked grim, as usual.

“What’s with the long face?”

Unusually, he didn’t even bother to acknowledge her weak attempt at humor. “Your mother emailed me.”

Oh dear.

“What about?” She took a long sip of her sparkling water and peered critically at her nails. Why they’d kept her in the makeup seat for two hours, painting them, she couldn’t understand. “Is it about the music video?”

Shiro fidgeted uncomfortably.

“I’m not going to shoot the messenger, Shiro. How bad is it?”

“Well,” he said, “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but they moved up the shoot two days. Something about how the director wasn’t-”

“But that makes the first day of filming tomorrow.”

“...yes.”

Fantasies of sinking into a plush mattress and taking a nap vanished instantly. “Doesn’t that mean…”

“We’re catching another flight today, yes. Shooting starts at eight in the morning tomorrow.”

There was no point in complaining, no point in feeling disappointed or dejected. She should have known this would happen. In fact, in retrospect, it made perfect sense that she’d take any sort of irritation out on them in the most passive aggressive way possible.

“This is her way of punishing us, isn’t it?”

“Probably,” Shiro admitted. “I can’t imagine it’s easy dealing with the amount of shit that the label is probably getting right now, but still… Apparently, she had the bags sent up on ahead without us, though, so that’ll make everything much easier. We’re getting our hotel reservations and information texted to us individually.”

He paused.

“Satsuki, are you alright?”

She didn’t respond.

In general, she didn’t speak much for the rest of the day, besides the requisite exchanges of ‘thank you’ and ‘until next time’. Not at the airport. Not on the plane. It’d been a long day. Still, she didn’t prop her face up against a hand, keeping her posture picture perfect. No use smudging her makeup.

A few kisses pressed to Shiro and Soroi’s cheeks as they went up ahead, and then they were free. They didn’t speak to each other until they were in the backseat of their town car, and Uzu studied her curiously as they drove through the Nevada streets.

“What are you doing?” He finally asked. She’d been quiet on the flight down, and even in the cab, she wasn’t doing much but swiping through photos on her own.

“Hm?”

“You’ve been on your phone all day.”

“Oh, that.”

Satsuki tilted the screen towards him. Dozens of very badly photoshopped photos of her in Nikes covered the phone. Uzu looked at the phone, at her, and back at the phone with the same exact blank face before speaking again.

“What the fuck.”

“They’re health goth edits,” she stated, matter of factly. “Apparently there are a lot of people who want to see me in black lipstick and workout gear.”

“What is wrong with people nowadays?”

“Mmn, I don’t particularly mind them. It’s kind of endearing watching so many people be as passionate as they are about something, even if it’s just us and our music.”

“Why crawl through the depths of your tags on the web when you could, I dunno, mace yourself and get it over with?”

“Oh, come on, it’s not that bad. I’ve just been thinking a lot about our fanbase. Maybe as a distraction from everything. I’m curious, honestly.”

“Well, be careful. Don’t scar yourself for life, or anything.”

“It’d take a lot to phase me at this point. Remember who I grew up with.”

“Ah. You’re right.” He slouched back in his seat, fiddling with the hem of his shirt. “Still. Take it easy, Sats.”

The sun was starting to set over the desert when she peeked through the tinted windows, and almost as if in response, her stomach let out a very audible growl. In the moment of awkward silence before they did anything, she swore she heard Uzu’s mouth drop open.

“My apologies-”

“You’re human after all. I was starting to worry.”

“Huh?”

“You’ve been running all day on nothing but Perrier, black coffee and glucose tablets.”

“Well, then, let’s eat.”

“Eat? Like, at a restaurant?”

She ran her gaze over him. The huge ouroboros on his shirt did not hide the fact that it very clearly read ‘blow me’, the beanie was slouching down his head so far she feared it’d fall off. Under the worn bomber jacket was an overlarge flannel shirt that just seemed to emphasize the amount of weight he’d lost recently.

All in all, he looked like a hot mess in steel-toed Doc Martens.

“I refuse to go out in public with you like this,” she stated flatly. “You look like a sixteen year old with weed socks that just discovered Unif.”

“Hey,” Uzu countered. “This is my signature look. Douche rockstar is kind of my thing, remember? I own like, two Misfits shirts, maybe, but I look good.”

“You look like a tool.”

“I *am* a tool. Hell, the internet is covered with pictures of my-”

“I don’t care. Don’t dress like one if we’re having dinner together.”

He scoffed.

“What are you gonna do, put me back in a tailored suit?” Uzu let out a snort and chuckled to himself. “You-”

“Of course.”

His smile faltered momentarily, but Satsuki did not so much as blink. His expression slid off his face like butter off a hot knife.

“You’re not kidding, are you.”

“Nope.” She tapped on the divider, and the driver looked over his shoulder with extreme indifference to the fact that they were doing forty down the boulevard. “Change of plans.”

“So what does he like?”

“Uzu?”

“You said it was his birthday, right?”

He peered down at the person standing next to him. Mako beamed back. He was still adjusting to the endless smiles directed his way, especially in comparison to the relatively sullen mohawked man and androgynous android. They made a very strange group, walking through the mall, bags in tow.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to help you with those?” He repeated, hands extended towards the tiny figure struggling under the weight of several large packages. “Really, I’m sure I could carry them without any problems-”

“No. I’m good.” She hummed tunelessly under her breath and shifted one of the boxes in her arms, bags moving perilously at the top of the huge stack. “Do you wanna sit down and chat?”

“Uh-”

“I’m hungry, anyway, and Ryuko asked me to bring her a cinnamon bun back, and maybe we can think more clearly with food in our tummies!”

“Er, well, yes, I guess that makes sense-”

“Oi, Tsumugu, Senketsu, do you guys wanna eat?”

They slowed. The two looked rather surprised at being addressed, but their answers were simple and curt.

“Sure.”

“I could use a recharge.”

“Perfect!”

Finding a seat at the mall food court was a challenge on the weekends, but somehow, they managed to squeeze into a booth by a Popeyes. Maybe it had something to do with the death glares that Kinagase kept shooting everyone, but he wasn’t about to complain. Mankanshoku peeked over her ridiculous stack of packages and beamed at them.

“If you guys don’t mind watching these, I’m gonna go grab some grub,” she chirped, dumping the bags into her spot. “I’ll be back in a moment- anyone want anything?”

Tsumugu shrugged. “Grab me three seven layer burritos and a diet coke while you’re up.”

“No problem! What about you, Mr. Gamagoori?”

“Please, just call me Gamagoori. I’m fine.”

Before she was even out of eyesight, the two figures across the table from him raised their eyebrows in perfect sync. From what Mankanshoku had told them, they didn’t get along very well, but he couldn’t have guessed it from the way they leaned forward. The taller man spoke first.

“What are your intentions with Mako?” he demanded, voice stern. Ira was a bit taken aback by his tone.

“I-intentions?”

“Ease off, Tsumugu,” Senkestu cut in. “The older brother schtick is lame.”

“You’re protective of her too, tin man,” Tsumugu shot back. “We just want her to be safe.”

“What did I just say-”

“Oi.”

They looked away from each other to glare at him, and he suddenly regretted getting their attention again.

"I, er, just want to get to know her better? She's a sweet g- er, person, we play the same instrument. Besides, you're touring with us. Might as well make friends."

Tsumugu hesitated. “Well, I mean- we’d have to have a group meeting to decide if we’re going to follow you, and whatnot-”

“Tsumugu,” Senketsu said quietly. “We don’t have a car anymore.”

Regret flashed through the man’s eyes. “You’re right.”

It was said that opportunity knocked rarely, but Ira didn’t think of the saying at all before the words came tumbling out.

“If you want, I can have the van fixed for free? I mentioned this earlier, but my uncle runs a repair shop in Oregon- it’d be a pain to have it taken so far, but I can arrange to have it fixed up, good as new.”

“Across state lines? Yeah, right,” Tsumugu scoffed, crossing his arms. “Didn’t you yourself say that piece of shit was beyond repair?”

“Think of it as a personal favor. I’ll have that van fixed up, good as new, we’ll have your instruments and bikes put on our tour bus, you can take the flights with us. I can understand a personal attachment to your van, however… vintage it is.”

There was an extended pause between the three of them as Tsumugu tried to gauge how much of a dig that was at the wreckage of his car.

“You can really do that?” he finally asked, settling back into his seat. “Like, for real?”

“I give you my word. Your van will be running, good as new, as soon as I make a few phone calls. Is that alright with you?”

The two exchanged looks before Tsumugu nodded.

“You know, you’re a good guy, Gamagoori.”

Ira shrugged. “Honestly, I’m just trying to do my work, but I appreciate the compliment.”

“Doesn’t mean we won’t break your kneecaps if you mess with Mako, but-”

“Tsumugu, you like the green hot sauce, right? I grabbed you a handful.”

A cheery voice cut into their conversation. Mako plopped back down in her seat with several bags worth of food and a huge grin on her face. Tsumugu’s intimidating facade immediately melted into his usual scowl.

“Yeah. Thanks, kid.”

“No problem!” Mako popped open the lid on her cinnamon bun and smiled, fork in hand. “Does anyone want a piece?”

Try as hard as he might, it was impossible to ignore the raised eyebrows from across the table when he raised his hand.

The murmur of the restaurant's customers was usually something she found comforting, yet it filled her with a deep unease as they made their way in.

"Reservations for two, please, under Kiryuin."

The maitre d raised an eyebrow at the two of them. It was understandable- the buzz of the excited paparazzi still echoed in the entrance hall. Behind her, Uzu very self-consciously shifted to another foot, rubbing the back of his neck. Satsuki resisted the impulse to smack his hand away before he made his hair look more disheveled. The Prada suited his figure magnificently, and she was sure they looked like quite the couple, towering over the older, dried out patrons, out to Vegas for one last attempt at fun before they crumbled and died and left inheritances to fight over.

Eyes lingered on them, dressed in black and long and lean and, dare she say, beautiful. Luckily for them, the Kiryuin name guaranteed some things, one of them their privacy. They disappeared behind velvet curtains to the quiet booth in the back, the heavy fabric muffling the drone of the crowd.

There were of course, the requisite words to be exchanged with their server, the menus placed in front of them, and then they were finally, finally alone. Neither of them spoke. Uzu seemed very interested in the beautiful leather bound menu, and she herself admittedly drank water until her glass was drained and another server silently refilled it, silent and efficient. Of the two of them, Uzu spoke first.

"Satsuki, are you okay?"

She swirled the water they'd billed as artisanal spring mineral water in her glass, despite having caught the sound of a running tap from the kitchens. "I'm fine."

"You're not one for public outings, so I thought-"

Satsuki grimaced. Perhaps he caught the shift in her expression, because his voice petered out.

"Was it-"

"My mother made us these reservations, yes. I'm not sure what she's playing at, but all I know is that I'm not exactly keen on playing along."

"She's being generous," he muttered, picking up his glass. "But people who are that consistently generous are never actually generous, though. She's got ulterior motives."

“Clearly.” She crossed her legs under the table, almost nervously. “So I’m asking for your help here.”

“Huh?”

“She’s got something up her sleeve. It isn’t like her to be this nice. I’ve got my suspicions about what she’s plotting, but I’m not sure what it is yet.” Satsuki flipped listlessly through the menu. “Whatever it is, I’ve got no doubt it involves you somehow. I’d watch your back.”

“Hey, your mom’s got a soft spot for me, if I remember correctly.” She stared at him, stone faced, as he stretched, grunting all the while. “Whatever it is, how bad can it be?”

“You do not want to be a favorite of Ragyo Kiryuin, Uzu.”

“Maybe you’re right, but as for me, I try to look on the bright side of things. I’m not the type to stare a gift horse in the mouth. Point is, if you’re that worried, just eat as much as you like. She’s footing the bill. Take advantage.”

Before she could retort, their server came by, briskly flipping through her notepad.

“Ready to order?”

“Uh, yeah.” Uzu scanned the menu again. “I’ll have the lobster- wait, no, the bone in rib eye. Fuck it, give me the lobster gnocchi too. I haven’t eaten today.”

“How would you liked that cooked?”

“Medium rare.”

“And you, ma’am?”

“I’ll have the scallops with the risotto and the A5 grade Wagyu, rare. And a wedge salad.” She paused. “Also, a red.”

“Would you like our wine list?”

“I’ll take the chef’s recommendation.” The menu shut with a satisfying click, and she handed it over to the server, as if she had already forgotten she was there. “Thank you.”

She wasn’t ten feet away before Uzu raised an eyebrow in her direction.

“You do know they’re going to give us a three thousand dollar bottle of wine, right?”

“You said it yourself, it’s on her bill.” Her eyes did not waver from his as she spread butter on a piece of bread she’d swiped from the basket. “Think of it as a form of petty revenge.”

“Still…”

“I’ll feel bad when we actually get our album profits.” Crumbs spilled everywhere as she bit into the bread, perhaps with more force than was truly necessary. “Until then, I refuse to feel

guilty about ordering two hundred dollars worth of steak."

"And then what are you going to do?"

Houka's breath rasped out, dry and needy, over the shitty speakers of the laptop. Skype crackled, the image of his boyfriend distorting into a mess of pixels as he tilted his hips up at the camera. If Houka knew he was using such an old model, there was no doubt in his mind he'd immediately go out and buy him a new one, but Shiro found such things unnecessary. It ran Excel perfectly fine, and that was all he needed it to do.

In any case, Houka still looked incredibly hot, face flushed and cock fully erect, spilling a few drops of precum down his shaft. If he weren't already hard, he'd take the time to make fun of him, but the way his voice keened as he looked into the camera was a thing of beauty. Besides, Shiro wasn't in the mood to be an asshole.

"I'm gonna make you… fuck, I'm gonna make you beg for my cock."

"How are you gonna make me beg?"

"Mn… I'm gonna…"

He'd had a glass of wine to take the edge off his day, but that, when combined with the exhaustion he'd accumulated over the day, made his words come slower and less precisely than he might have wanted them to. He allowed himself a few indulgent strokes as he fumbled for words to say, focusing intensely on the way Houka looked at him through half lidded eyes.

His boyfriend was so, so hot, and the distance between them made everything that much more frustrating. Shiro wanted nothing more than to bend him over a desk and fuck him senseless, and yet mutual masturbation was the best they were going to get until their tour allowed them to reunite. At least, it served as a way to practice talking dirty. In any case, he watched the way Houka's mouth dropped open involuntarily, stimulation making him weak and vulnerable and open in the way he only became when they were in bed together. The groan he let slip did more to him than he wanted to admit, and he felt himself building as he gave in to simply fucking his hand.

So the knock at the door was like a kick to the teeth. In all the years he'd known Houka, he'd never quite seen him go so white as when Soroi's voice rang through the wood.

"Shiro? May I come in?"

Neither of them had time to do anything but panic, their eyes widening in their sockets as Shiro pulled the blankets over his head, the laptop almost clattering to the floor in his haste. When he spoke, he hoped that he didn't sound choked.

“J-just a minute, Uncle-”

He snapped the laptop closed. The cable of his headphones caught between the folded halves of the computer, but he had no time to worry about that- so long as they stayed plugged in, he wouldn’t be able to catch any noise Houka made. With both of his eyes screwed shut, he willed his body to relax, the accumulated tension in his muscles begging for the release of an orgasm that wasn’t going to come any time soon. Nothing could have possibly made him softer faster than the gentle voice of the only true parental figure he’d ever really known.

The thick comforter would hide his erection until it softened, and he flexed a leg experimentally, hoping to draw blood away from his dick. “You can come in now, Uncle.”

Mitsuzo Soroi might have been going on in years, but one could never have guessed from the way he carried himself, still, entering his late sixties. The man’s presence was almost regal, even if his brow creased with some concern.

“Are you alright, Shiro?”

He nodded furiously.

“Yes, Uncle,” he choked out, in what had to have been the least reassuring affirmation he’d ever given anyone. “Really, I’m fine,” he insisted, watching the wrinkle between Soroi’s eyebrows deepen. “Just taken aback. I wasn’t expecting you tonight. You usually go to bed when Satsuki does. Is everything alright?”

“Well, I do have some minor concerns about Satsuki, but that’s not what brings me here.” He hesitated in the entrance of the room, hovering in a way that didn’t suit him.

“Uncle?”

“Do you mind if I sit, Shiro?”

“Uh, no, go ahead.” He tried to keep his face as innocent as possible, any trace that he’d just been camming with his boyfriend out of his expression. “What is it?”

The butler sat on the edge of his bed, face placid. “Well, for starters, you almost left your personal phone in the cab on the way here. You’re not getting enough sleep if you’re making such simple mistakes.”

Shiro looked on dumbly as he extracted the slim phone from his jacket pocket. “Thank you, Uncle…”

“Which brings me to my next point.” His eyes did not flicker from his face as Shiro closed a hand around the phone. “It was still on and unlocked when I found it, and you know I don’t pry into your personal affairs, but is there something you want to tell me?”

If he thought he’d been nervous earlier, his mouth was suddenly bone dry. Memories of what he’d been googling beforehand flickered through his mind with a deep sense of unease.

“I-”

“Shiro, I want you to trust me.”

He stayed silent.

“Ever since your mother and father died, I have raised you like my own son. I’ve watched you grow into a fine young man, watched you go through your relationship with Inumuta happily, work hard, and I can’t express how deeply proud I’ve been of you.” He inhaled for a moment before letting out a slow breath. “So if you’re not my son, then I want you to know I will love you, regardless of what you wish to be called.”

Something inexplicably painful twisted in the pit of his stomach, and to his horror, the same mysterious sensation pricked at his eyes. Warmth collected behind his face, in the pit of his stomach, and yet instead of coherently responding, he let out a strangled noise.

“Shiro? Are you alright?”

There was obvious concern in his uncle’s words, so instead of letting the tears gathering in his eyes fall, he cleared his throat brusquely. “I’m fine.”

“I hope you know I’m serious, Shiro. I love you very, very much.”

“I know, Uncle. Thank you.”

The elderly man smiled in response. He sighed.

“I love you too.”

“That being said, I do have a serious question for you.”

Nausea churned violently in his stomach as potential questions swarmed in his head. “Y-yes?”

“Shouldn’t Lady Satsuki’s luggage have arrived by now?”

“Uncle, she told you to stop calling her that.”

“It’s the habit of an old man. My apologies.”

Unease flickered at the back of his head. “Maybe their bags got lost or misplaced?”

“Perhaps, but… it seems very out of character for Mistress Ragyo to be so careless. Also, it’s getting rather late… I’ll go check up front and see if they’ve checked into their rooms yet. She would have called me, though… but I’m an old man, and old men worry.”

“Right. I’ll call her right away, just in case.”

Soroi patted him firmly on the shoulder in a way that was reassuring rather than patronizing, and nodded. “I’ll be back soon to update you.”

“Right. Have a good evening, Uncle.”

The door's echo as it shut behind him hadn't even finished ringing around the room before a voice crackled out of the headphones.

"What the hell was that?"

"Houka?"

Noise leaked out of the speakers that he raised back to his ears, and there was genuine confusion in his boyfriend's words when he spoke. "What was that?"

"The Satsuki thing? Must be a misunderstanding of some sort-"

"Not that. The name thing. What was he talking about?"

"Pronouns," Shiro corrected him automatically. "It's nothing, really-"

"Do we need to talk about something, or?"

"Houka, listen. I love you and all, I really do, but… I've got to finish up work here. Can we move this to tomorrow?"

There was an intake of breath that he knew was the beginning of a retort, but then he heard a sigh
of defeat instead.

"Alright. I'm not going to be irrational, and if Satsuki needs you, I'm the last person who'll get in the way."

"Thank you. I love you, Houka. Sleep tight."

"I love you too. Goodnight, Shiro."

The Skype call ended with little fanfare. Unease hovered at the edge of Shiro's consciousness, but he shoved aside the thoughts- they were, after all, merely distractions from his work.

He was loitering out in the parking lot when she swept into the hotel, mercifully free of anyone with a camera. The wine she'd had was not doing a sufficiently good job of numbing her annoyance at the entire check in process, but her suitcases were where they were supposed to be, and it was only a few minutes before the door unlocked and she was finally, finally free from the physical burden of her luggage. Bags were dropped onto the floor, and the bathroom was enormous and pristine. Satsuki squinted in the mirror, checking for any glaring flaws in her makeup before trying to remember which bag she'd packed the makeup remover in.

Just then, her thoughts were interrupted by the muffled sound of a door closing. Every muscle in her body tensed at once, thoughts racing through her head.

A crazed fan? A particularly stubborn paparazzo? This was absolutely ridiculous. At least this time, she would be pressing charges- if they managed to keep their cognitive abilities when she was done with them.

The doorknob was perfectly oiled, and so were the hinges, so they did not creak when she slipped out behind the figure. Her muscles tensed in preparation, and wordlessly, she lunged. The intruder's legs locked around her neck in an attempt to cut her breathing off, but they were trapped on her shoulders as she lifted him with her thigh muscles, only to let gravity take its toll when she leaned backwards, arms still wrapped tightly around their waist. The intruder's head made a loud, dull thud when it smashed into the carpeted floor below them, and their body went limp for a moment as she extricated herself from their legs. Nice.

Really, it was a pity there was nowhere here to commend her for such a neatly and efficiently executed suplex.

"Dude, Satsuki… why the fuck did you do that?"

Glory turned to ice water in her veins immediately at the genuinely upset tone Uzu was taking on.

"Oh. Oh my god-"

His eyes were a little unfocused, but he managed to grab her extended hand after a few false starts, and Uzu stumbled to his feet, still very obviously dazed. Satsuki bit back apologies to try and get to the heart of the matter immediately.

"What's going on?"

"Uh…"

"Why are you in my room?" The words came out harsher than she'd expected them to, but Uzu looked so completely dumbfounded that she softened her tone. "I mean, why are our bags here?"

"Well, they told me it was this suite, and the key card seems to open the door, so I assumed…?"

"Yes, but this is my room. Did the concierge make a mistake?"

Uzu looked around hesitantly, as if he were waiting for the likes of Ashton Kutcher to jump out and scream 'surprise!', but the room stayed as solemnly quiet as ever. As he did though, eyes widened in very obvious worry. Satsuki's eyes followed his gaze and-

Oh.

Ohhhhh no.

The walls were lined with beautiful red wallpaper, fleur de lis black outlines repeating infinitely across the room. Lace curtains shielded the massive bed, draped in plush covers with an ornately sculpted headboard that gleamed gold (gilded, she hoped). The carpets covering the floor were so thick her heels stuck, and when she turned to look back at Uzu, his face was flushed with sheer embarrassment at the tackiness before them.

“There’s champagne,” he muttered, and to her horror, she realized he was right. Sitting on a table in the middle of the suite was an ice filled bucket with two green bottles poking out, crystal glasses at the ready. “I can’t deal with this.”

“The concierge must have made a mistake,” she parrotted, numbness crawling up her spine. “It has to be a mistake.”

“I’m gonna- fuck. *Fuck.* Ugh. I’m going to have another smoke and try and straighten shit out downstairs, okay? Just sit tight for now.”

“It’s a mistake,” Satsuki repeated, but Uzu was already jogging out the door, relief on his face plain as day. The overwhelming amount of red in the room was making her dizzy.

Shiro was still her number one on speed-dial, and his voice when he picked up suggested that he’d been waiting.

“Satsuki, where the *hell* are you?”

“What do you mean, where the hell am I? I’m at my room, and somehow, someone’s mixed up me and Sanageyama- I think we got the honeymoon suite.”

“Oh, jesus. Oh, fuck.”

“What is it?”

“I knew something smelled funny. What hotel are you at?”

“Same hotel as you? I followed the email, I’m at the Mandarin-”

“We’re at the Venetian, Satsuki.”

“...oh.”

There was a long pause before she heard a sigh from his end.

“I’ll go see if we can get you guys an extra room, either here or at your hotel. Should we come over and fix this mess?”

“It’s fine. I’ll just sort this out with Hououmaru, Shiro. Please, please get some sleep, you’ve looked like a zombie for days. Don’t worry Soroi, either, tell him everything will be fine.”

“Satsuki, it’s quite literally my job to fix this-”

“Go to sleep.”

“But-”

“As your best friend, I’m demanding you go to sleep.” Her voice took on an edge, and she groaned, pinching at the bridge of her nose. “You’re starting to sound borderline hysterical, and you’ll be useless tomorrow if you’re running on fumes. I’ll sort this out myself.”

It took another minute of persuading Shiro to sleep and pointing out that his words were beginning to slur before he conceded, and a gentle wish of a good night’s rest before she hung up. With that out of the way, she cast a look at the door, waiting for Uzu’s return, and started pacing around the bed, heels sticking in the carpet and threatening to trip her up. She’d told Shiro she’d handle the situation, and while she was confident that it’d all go smoothly enough, she was uncharacteristically anxious. Something was off. It really wasn’t like her people to screw something so simple up so catastrophically, much less on a scale like this. Really, you’d have to be an idiot to set up such a cheesy, bad romance novel-esque situation. This was tackiness on par with an eighties’ pop star’s-

Oh.

Realization hit like a truck, and she felt her stomach drop down to her knees. But she was already dialing the number she loathed so much before she could react in any other way, and the only thing she could do was hope her voice didn’t waver when she finally spoke.

A very familiar voice answered the phone.

“You have reached the office of Miss Ragyo Kir-”

“Rei, it’s Satsuki. I need to speak to my mother *immediately.*"

There was a pause.

“My lady, are you sure this isn’t something I can help you with? Your mothe- I mean, Mistress Ragyo, is busy with her other protege at the moment-”

“It’s got to be her, and I don’t care. Put her on. You can blame me for interrupting their tea party, or whatever it is that she does in her spare time besides cause everyone grief.”

“As you wish.”

There was the muffled, unmistakable noise of a phone being pressed against flesh, and muted murmurs. Try as she might, Satsuki couldn’t catch a single word of the brief exchange between them, but the hairs on her neck stood up involuntarily when the next person spoke.

“Satsuki, I’m busy, so you’ll have to call me later. Whatever it is, it can wait. I’ll call you in the morning, your time.”

“But-”

The phone beeped to signal the end of the call. Without delay, she pressed the number back into the keypad.

When the phone told her that the line was tied up, she looked warily at her contact's list before dialing another number. There were three rings exactly before a saccharine voice cut into her skull like a cavity boring into a tooth.

"You never call me, Satsuki~!"

In the background, she heard her mother's groan.

"Put my mother on the phone, please. My apologies for interrupting your tea party."

"Oh, you're so mean, Sats!" The perfectly rehearsed puppy eyes tone she was taking on was incredibly familiar, and she grit her teeth. "Junketsu is getting better at making tea, you know. It's rude of you to keep calling when we're so busy."

"Junketsu can't taste tea or cake, you know."

"That's what everyone says, but I'm sure she's enjoying herself. She says hi, by the way."

"Junketsu doesn't have vocal chords."

"She's waving. Say hi back!"

"Hello."

Despite Satsuki's obvious lack of enthusiasm, the girl on the other end of the line plowed on. "You should see the co-ord I put her in today! All white, Baby the Stars Shine Bright, with the *cutest* bonnet- I've been having fun dressing her in my old cast-offs."

"Your old idol clothing? Congratulations on your graduation."

"Just my lolita, but that too. And thank you! Congratulations on your USA tour- when you come back to Japan, we should do a tour together."

"Uh-huh."

Satsuki's eyes focused on the door as it re-opened, Uzu looking sullen.

I'm on the phone, she mouthed, and he nodded, walking over as quietly as he could.

"Satsuki, is that Sanageyama in the background? I heard a door open."

Uzu looked mildly panicked at the mention of his name. Not that she could blame him- her shrill voice always found a way to carry away from the speakers, making it impossible for him to not overhear them. "Yes, it is."

"Can I ask you something?"

He unscrewed a bottle of water that he'd taken from the fridge and looked warily at the phone in her hand. Apprehension was always the right attitude to have when she was involved.

"...sure."

“If you’re so close, why didn’t you tell me about his piercing?”

There was an extremely loud choking noise as Uzu spluttered, water pouring out of his nostrils. Satsuki pressed her eyes closed and breathed a silent thanks to the wine still in her system, and the champagne not ten feet away from her.

“I’d have had to know about it beforehand to tell you, and also, why would I reveal such an intimate fact about a friend?”

“You know I’m all about accuracy! What’s the use of having the most access to your records of pretty much anyone on the RPF-AI Livejournal and AO3 community if I’m short such an important detail? By the way, I’m texting you both a link to my newest piece right about… now.”

Both of their phones buzzed. Uzu looked warily at his as he wiped his mouth. Satsuki shook her head frantically.

“As much as I’d love to talk to you about your pornographic interest in me and my friends, can you pass the phone to my mother?”

“Jeez, no need to be so cold, Satsuki.”

Satsuki didn’t answer. On the other end, the girl sighed deeply.

“*Fiiiiiine.* Lady Ragyo~”

There was the unmistakable scratch of her nails scratching against her Deco case and a jingle of charms as the phone exchanged hands, and a sigh that did not bode well for her.

“Satsuki, dearest, what seems to be the problem?”

She caught herself before she could stutter.

“Mother, if I may ask, respectfully, of course, why in the *hell* are our hotel room arrangements like this?”

There was another pause, and the unmistakable giggle in the background that set her teeth on edge. It took her mother fifteen seconds to answer her, and she tapped them against the side of her leg as she counted until she finally responded, feigning innocence in every syllable.

“I haven’t got the foggiest idea what you might mean, dear. Is the hotel not to your liking?”

“Well, no, that’s not it-”

“Is your suite not big enough?”

“Well, I might enjoy it more if it weren’t the literal honeymoon suite-”

“Look, I tried to get you a room at the Luxor, but I forgot about that pesky restraining order. I’m sure I can finagle something for you two if you’d rather stay there? I’m sure Four

Seasons still has a few suites left-”

“That’s not the problem-”

“Well, if you like the room, then what could possibly be the matter?”

“It might be the fact that you only got us one room, and, oh, I don’t know, Shiro is halfway across the city?”

Another infuriatingly long pause, this one punctuated with the grating sound of a sip from what either had to be a wineglass or a teacup. Satsuki furrowed her eyebrows.

“Oh, *that.*”

“Yes, that!”

“I don’t see the big fuss, really. I’m sure that bed is big enough to fit the entire band twice over.”

“It’s also heart shaped.”

“So?”

“So, what will people… think…”

This time, the silence between them was her fault, and something acidic crawled up her throat.

“Oh.”

Nausea and pure anger boiled in the pit of her stomach, and she was glad nobody was around to witness her momentary blip in composure.

“*Oh.*”

“Oh, what, Satsuki? I haven’t got all day. Your sister’s waiting for me, and it’s very rude to interrupt evening tea with silly conversations.”

“*Why?*”

“Why?”

“Yes, why, why would you make us out to be-”

“Oh, come on, dear, you can’t possibly be that blind, could you?”

Bile burned in the back of her mouth, and her eyes rolled up to stare at ceiling, counting numbers in prime until she could respond without screaming. It took a while before she could trust her voice to not waver in sheer rage.

“Blind?”

“The ice cold, pure white, virgin queen, in the arms of Hollywood’s favorite bad boy! Can you see the headlines? Your interview together will no doubt spark rumors, of course, but if that’s the spark, then this is the fire.”

“You want rumors of us *eloping*?”

“Well, dear, one does not need share a honeymoon suite with your newlywed husband. I would know, after all.” She paused to take another drink. “It is, however, traditional to do so, so I could see where the rumors might arise.”

Satsuki suppressed the urge to shudder violently.

“And, after all, people will always believe what they want to believe. You’re free to check out, but the room and everything in it’s already been paid for, and you’ve already been filmed entering together, no doubt.”

Blood rushed through her ears, and her mother’s voice sounded very far away as she sunk into the plush mattress. “So you’re saying it’s futile.”

“Well, I suppose that what *you’d* call damage has already been done. My advice, dearest, is to take advantage of the situation.”

“Take… advantage?”

Ragyo’s voice took on another layer, smooth as velvet, but significantly less comforting.

“I’ve never been a proponent of lying back and thinking of England. It’s not the first time you’ve shared a hotel room with Sanageyama, has it? Enjoy yourself, dear. You’ve earned it.”

“I-”

“I probably won’t pick up if you call again within the next few hours. But I left you a few gifts to make anything you choose to do easier.”

Maybe her mute horror was obvious through the phone, because her mother’s sigh crackled with static.

“Whatever you choose to do or not do, however, at least please appreciate the Dom Perignon. The bottles are from ‘90.”

The line went dead in her hand, ignoring the choking noises she was making in the back of her throat.

Satsuki sat mutely on the bed, blood rushing through her ears as she tried to compose herself somewhat. Anger was useless to her if she couldn’t harness it effectively, and she breathed through her nose to try and calm herself down. Surely there were other rooms in the hotel. There had to be. This was just an inconvenience. She steeled herself for a moment before she turned to look at Uzu, still wiping water off his chin.

“What’s the situation, then?”

He looked at her forlornly.

“Some huge conference is going on in this hotel, and every single room is sold out.”

“Are you serious?”

“This was intentional. Holy shit. What the fuck is her problem?”

“I don’t know, Sanageyama. If you want, we could ask Soroi to get us rooms at their hotel, but…”

“But?”

“It’s late. I need to sleep soon.”

“Ah.” He ran a hand through his hair awkwardly and exhaled. “Uh, do you need to use the bathroom?”

Their eyes did not meet as she nodded. “I’ll change in there. You can get dressed here.”

“Right.”

When the door separating them closed, she took a ragged breath and groaned, hands clutching at the mirror. The night was starting to take its toll on her makeup, and even though her toiletries and pajamas were tightly clutched under her arm, she did not make a move to reach for her makeup remover. Nor did she kick off her platforms, despite the dull throbbing pain radiating from her soles. She could deal with pain.

Makeup bag and wipes and silk dropped into the sink with little grace as she looked into the glass, concealer beginning to wear off where her face creased, so that her dark circles shone through behind her foundation. The curiosity that had almost ruined friendships for her before was something experience had taught her to reign in. Still, far be it from her capacity to twist a situation to better suit her. And steeling herself was something that came as naturally to her as breathing.

He was still undoing his shoelaces when she walked back out again, jaw set and eyes determined.

“Satsuki?”

“Sanageyama.”

His face didn’t register intent, even as she walked up closer, hand outstretched.

“When I met you, you promised you’d do me a favor, right?”

“...yes?”

The outstretched hand trailed through his hair and down his sideburns to hold his jaw in her grasp. Stormy skies were supposed to be grey, but there was no cloudiness in his eyes when

she pressed a thumb and index finger together to pucker his lips. This, at least, he could understand.

"Because I have a favor to ask you."

His eyes were always carefully averted, but he didn't resist her when fingers tilted his face towards her. To his credit, his eyes didn’t so much as flicker downwards, stubbornly holding her gaze.

“You’re not the type to ask for favors often, Satsuki.”

It took a surprising amount of self-control to resist laughing. “Do you mind?”

Uzu hesitated. When he responded, there was a solemness in his voice that didn’t suit his usual demeanor.

“Is this what you want?”

In response, she pulled away from his jaw. He exhaled, relieved, almost, before she offered the back of her hand, silently. Eyes focused on her, dark grey and otherwise impossible to read, had she not known him for so long. Satsuki stared right back, unwavering.

Then, very slowly, he pressed a kiss to the back of her knuckles.

She nodded.

An odd sensation ran down her spine when his lips grazed her wrist on the way up to her shoulder. Everything about the way he barely touched her felt like she was too precious to lay hands on, and it didn’t help the knot in her stomach. Perhaps he noticed the tension in her posture, because gentle hands pushed the hair away from her neck. His tongue was warm and wet and she wondered if he’d felt her shake, just the tiniest bit, enough to shift the mass of dark hair falling back just a bit.

Gentle hands pressed down on her hips to buckle her knees, so that the mattress pressed up into her back. Soft, warm, and were this anything else but what it was, comfortable. If she closed her eyes, she could almost enjoy this, almost let the tension in her shoulder dissipate.

And god, even if it was only for a second, was it hard to focus on the tightness in her abdomen when he sucked at her throat, hands flitting up to hold him closer, his hair almost black in the dim lighting. The silk sheets knotted in her grip, and she knew she definitely not the first to let her head loll back and certainly not the last either. At least that was another mystery solved, why they never stopped, an endless parade of faceless figures in and out of his hotel rooms. If her fondness for the boy kissing her neck were anything but what it was, it would almost sting.

Almost.

There it was again, the hand on her thigh. She mentally weighed it, heavy and warm and just sufficiently unsteady that she could tell he was trying to impress her. A muscle twitched, her nervous system betraying her again. Maybe he could sense her unease at being caught off

guard like that, slowed breathing through half gritted teeth, because he paused, teeth pressed to paper-thin skin with the barest of pressure. She could feel her pulse against the enamel of his bite, red on white, and resisted the urge to shiver when his spare hand slid down to pin her wrist, briefly.

Sheets rustled as his face traveled lower, skimming over the skintight satin number Shiro had left in her dressing room, and her fingers curled in his hair when he pulled it up her thighs, mouth trailing up along the skin exposed by his actions, muscles tensed, eyes wild, he really did live to serve, didn't he, and was it really necessary to wallpaper the room with such a tacky shade of scarlet-

"Satsuki."

"Huh?"

Between her knees knelt the most infamous- well, playboy wasn't the right word. Neither was womanizer, which would then imply he was anything resembling heterosexual. Heartbreaker would then suggest that he cared for romancing those who warmed his bed at night, and he'd never held any sort of pretense about being any of those things.

Well, then, between her knees knelt her friend, and his brow was furrowed and his eyes stormy.

"This doesn't feel right."

His expression didn't waver when she allowed herself a full-face scowl in his direction.

"What do you mean?"

Uzu hesitated momentarily, mouth opening before snapping it shut again. "Do you really, really want me to-"

She wasn't sure if it was irritation, of all emotions, that showed most prominently on her face, but he winced in response.

"Is something the matter?"

"W-well, no-"

"Do you not want to?"

Eyes dropped, downcast. Satsuki's mouth pursed into a frown.

"Would you feel better if I took ahold of the reins?"

He hesitated, just long enough for her to smile.

"Well, that can easily be arranged."

It was easy, so easy to flip him over onto his back, and he inhaled deeply when she climbed onto him, face like stone. With his hair spilling onto the pillow, he could almost be mistaken for some blushing maiden, or perhaps a samurai's consort, splayed across the mattress. He certainly had the luminescent blush that kind of role would require. Really, if it weren't for the lack of enthusiasm in his eyes…

"Satsuki, you don't have to-"

Buttons should be easy to undo, she wore blouses all the time, why did the tiny plastic nubs keep slipping under her fingers-?

It wasn't until his hands closed over hers that she realized she was trembling.

"Satsuki."

Anger welled up like bile in her throat, frustration threatening to spill tears onto her cheeks, but she'd kill him before she'd let him see her like this. Impatient, she tugged again at his chest, a button popping in her haste to strip him bare. His hands squeezed, gentle but firm, like the voice that broke the shaky silence.

"Satsuki. Stop."

The hands dropped onto his chest, empty.

"We don't have to play pretend. Don't force yourself."

"I'm not pretending."

She shifted in his lap and had the strange satisfaction of watching him bite his lip and tense beneath her. The way he set his jaw determinedly told her she was succeeding in her attempts. This was clearly getting hard for him.

Well, that, amongst other things.

She arched an eyebrow perfectly and he groaned, arm thrown across his face, which was a perfect shade of beet red.

"It's a physiological reaction, okay?"

"Should I be flattered?" Her voice held back a thinly veiled laugh, and he averted his eyes, blushing furiously.

"Probably not. I mean, it's not like it takes much-"

She leaned back on his legs, and he let out a poorly stifled moan.

"Satsuki."

"What is it?"

“Please get off of me," he muttered. “We’re not doing this.”

Maybe he sensed her falter, because his hands closed over the clenched fists on his chest and pulled her away from the front of his shirt.

“You’re the easiest one,” she murmured. “So why won’t you…?”

"Because you don't want to do this.”

“You-”

“Don't force yourself for the sake of the media."

This made her frown.

"First of all, I’m not doing anything for anyone but me. And secondly, I wouldn't ask if I weren't willing."

"Willing, maybe, but not eager.” He sighed. “Look, I owe you everything, and you know I don't like saying no to you-"

"Do you not want to?"

"No- well, I mean- uh, rather-"

"Do you not find me attractive?"

"You're gorgeous, Satsuki, but that isn't the problem here." He gestured vaguely with his spare hand. "I don't think about you like that. And even if I did, you're way out of my league-
"

Satsuki shifted very deliberately in his lap, and this time his face contorted. It took him a few seconds to regain his composure, and when he spoke, there was a waver in his voice.

“You’re playing dirty.”

"You owe me, Uzu."

"Look." He raised an eyebrow at her. "It's not that I'm not willing. But this isn’t really the kind of thing you call in old favors over."

“It’s not exactly… *difficult* to seduce you.”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he looked at the wall, jaw set in the way that told her she was getting nowhere with him. “You’ll regret it.”

“Will I?”

“*I’ll* regret it.”

“They already think we’re doing it, you know.”

“I know they do. But they don’t have to be right.”

“We’d make a good couple. You don’t even have to do anything when we’re not in public if you don’t want to.”

“Are you trying to bribe me?” He ran a hand through his hair and exhaled loudly. “Come on, Satsuki. That’s fucked up. You don’t have to do that. I’d pretend to date you regardless, if that’s what you really want.”

“Oh, believe me, I know I don’t.”

“Then what’s with this weird offer? It’s not your normal way of getting me to do things, to say the least, and, to be honest, you should stick to your usual methods. There’s a difference between tension and being tense, and I’m not all too sure you understand it, given all of… that.”

“Does it really matter, though?”

“It matters to me. I don’t see you like that.”

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes, the clock ticking obnoxiously in the relative silence. The erection pressing at her backside softened, but the awkwardness hung heavy in the air.

“Is this your way of asking me to do less drugs or something?” Uzu finally asked. “You could just ask me to do less uppers, or something.”

“No.” She paused abruptly. “You should, by the way, stop that, but it’s not that. I’m just trying to make our lives easier.”

He scoffed. “Then why do I get the feeling you’re trying to protect me from something? I can take care of myself, you know.”

“And by taking care of yourself, you mean?”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t?”

“Do that.”

“Do what?”

“Mom me. This scenario is already as Oedipal as they come.”

Silence. She knit her fingers together, and he sighed and continued.

“What is it you want? And I mean *really* want. We can bargain, but keep your panties on, because facesitting isn't on the menu tonight.”

Satsuki raised an eyebrow. “If we, hypothetically, did have sex, though…”

“Look, I just wanted to make a shitty pun, okay? If we did, hypothetically, of course, have sex, you would be more than welcome to sit wherever the fuck you wanted.”

“Good. For a moment there, I thought we were going to pretend you’d be on top.”

“Look, my reputation as a career bottom has to stay unblemished. Of course not.” He paused. “Jokes aside, though…”

“Yes?”

“Please don’t try and do this again. I’m not comfortable with us like this. And I do mean it when I say I’d follow you to the end of the world- I owe you my life. But…”

“It was a bad idea from the start. Thank you for stopping me. I won’t do that again.” She groaned deeply. “I… apologize.”

There was a prolonged silence between them. Uzu looked profoundly unnerved by the words coming out of her mouth, but finally, he spoke, breaking the tension between them.

“You don’t have to try and manipulate people into doing your bidding, especially when they already love you.” A hand hovered around her shoulder before awkwardly patting the entire area between that and her collarbone. “I mean, we’ve known each other for six years, for fuck’s sake, you could just try asking me for whatever it is you want.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

His obvious discomfort was unpleasant, and she watched mutely as he rubbed the back of his neck, desperate for the moment to be over.

“I know.”

There was another long pause before she sat up and smiled as sweetly as she could. “I mean, I guess I’m not your type.”

“Huh? It’s not that-”

“Guess you prefer shorter girls,” she said, and had the pleasure of watching the words register with him. Suddenly, her vision clouded, and something white and soft smacked into her face. It wasn’t until she was on her back that she realized who had thrown the pillow.

“Oh, come on. Is it really *that* embarrassing to you?”

“I do *not* like her-”

“You’re not as sneaky as you think you are, you know.”

“Shut *up.*”

“Am I wrong?”

Uzu looked stunned for a moment before vigorously nodding. The hesitation in his movements did not miss her.

“Then who were those nudes meant for?”

“Not her. Shit, did you see us this morning? Nonon would kill me if I sent her anything like that without her permission, and she’d be right to do it too.”

“You were the one that was so insistent about knowing if her phone was okay.” A thought dawned on her. “Were those supposed to be leaked to protect her?”

His face was turning an alarming shade of magenta. “No…”

“You’re about as subtle as a sledgehammer, Sanageyama.” A grin crossed her face, and she scrambled back into a sitting position. “It’s okay. I can keep a secret.”

“You don’t get to flip this on me! It’s- I’m-”

“A hopeless romantic?”

“Please shut up, you were the one trying to climb me five minutes ago.”

“I for one fail to see the romance in a pathetic half hearted attempt at seduction.”

“Touche. I’ll blame that on the bottle of wine, though.”

Her eyes trailed over to the champagne poking out of the ice, and before he could react properly, she was crawling over him to reach for them. His choked noises of protest were cut off by her triumphantly pulling a bottle free, dripping water down her arm.

“Ta-da.”

“Sats,” Uzu grunted, “I’m glad you got your fancy alcoholic sparkling water and all but… you’re crushing me.”

“Fancy a drink?” She brandished the bottle proudly, and he raised an eyebrow. “No strings attached.”

“Whatever you say, Satsuki. Whatever you say.”

Still, he didn’t say no when she handed him the bottle to open.

It was funny how something as dainty and highbrow as champagne could get them like this. If someone had told him, only a few hours ago, that he was capable of slow dancing to The Strokes, he'd have laughed at them. And yet here they were, alcohol buzzing in the extremities of his body where they touched.

In fact, if someone had looked upon the scene, it could almost have been passed off as romantic, but he knew Satsuki Kiryuin didn't know the meaning of the word. Maybe, years ago, when he was bright eyed and new to her, he could have made the mistake of thinking it was anything of the sort. Still, he looked down at her, smiling despite himself at the lack of barriers between them. For the first time in living memory, she looked peaceful.

"It's nice to see you so relaxed," he blurted out.

Satsuki raised an eyebrow at his statement.

"I mean, you always look so uptight… I mean, Ira's upright too, but there was that time with the edible, and like, I smoke with Houka and Nonon all the time, it's just you that's always so tense. It suits you. The not worrying, I mean-"

"Do you worry about me?"

"Not really, it's just, I mean, I'm always causing trouble for you and Shiro and Ira, and like, I'm sorry, its just that drunk Satsuki is nice and-"

Fingernails pierced his cheeks as she squeezed his face, forcing fingers between his jaw. Involuntarily, he squeaked.

"You know, drunk you talks too much."

For a moment, he hesitated. Their foreheads clacked together, not hard enough to cause any real damage, but he felt the flutter of her eyelashes on his cheek momentarily and tasted the champagne on her breath. They were close enough that he could feel her breathing, and she laughed, fingers curled in between his.

"Didn't take you for the bashful type."

"You're drunk."

"Mmn. You're right." She puckered her lips in his direction anyway and laughed again. "You're still blushing, though."

This time, he rolled his eyes.

"If you're trying to mess with me, it won't work. It's not like I haven't kissed you for music videos before. Your face being this close to mine is nothing new. Also, we've both had a lot of champagne, Miss Kiryuin. You're a little red yourself."

If he didn't know her better, he'd call the noise she made in response a giggle, but drunk or not, Satsuki was not one for giggling. She swayed against him, the curve of her waist fitting

nicely in his hand. Alcohol didn't change the steel in her eyes or her perfect posture, and the only sign she was intoxicated at all was the way she wobbled in her heels. Impulsively, he pulled her to his chest, her head leaning flat against his pecs as they shuffled across the floor.

"Your heartbeat is nice and slow," she whispered. Ths music had ended, and her words were the only sound in the room besides the clicking of their feet and the rustling of their clothing. "I don't like it."

"And what do you suppose we do to change that?"

Her feet slowed to a halt, and something approaching glee lit up her face.

"Something stupid."

"Well, okay, but our clothes are staying on- what the hell are you doing?"

Satsuki pulled the other bottle of Dom Perignon out of the ice bucket and was trying to open it to no avail. Uzu watched with mild helplessness as she struggled with the wire cage.

"Er, Satsuki, you need any help…"

She ignored him, rubbing at the neck of the bottle with the towel until she managed to pop the cork out. Fizzing wine bubbled over her hand, and something remarkably like triumph crossed her face.

Uzu was suddenly incredibly grateful for the reflected light and alcohol to blame his flush on. His eyes focused on the gleaming glass bottle as she put it to her lips and look a long swig, and again when she inverted it and let it spill out onto the floor. Even drunk, he could only let out a long whistle.

"That's gotta be, like, several thousand dollars of champagne."

"Like I care about something she's forced onto us. Do you want some more before I dump the rest?"

"Nah." He sunk into the mattress, mesmerized. "I don't think I'll ever see a more useless waste of money in my life again."

The bubbles sunk and melted into the carpet, the handicraft and work and money of hundreds disappearing into the floor forever. Satsuki looked down at the carpet as if she'd forgotten why she'd done that.

"Hey, Uzu."

"Huh?"

"You're the bad boy rockstar type, and all that, and I know that you've gotten into a lot of trouble that my mother's had to clean up…"

“All in a day’s work.” He rolled over onto his side to look at her, staring pensively at the bottle in her hand. “What about it?”

“Have you ever, uh, trashed a hotel room?”

Without meaning to, he snorted. “What, do you want to? Not sure I wanna deal with the legal shit behind that- and besides, hotel room trashing is passe as fuck.”

“I don’t know. It just doesn’t feel right to wreck this whole place- the hotel staff have to clean it up, and all, but at the same time, I feel like we’ve got to make her pay somehow, and- what are you doing?”

Kudos to his tolerance- years of drinking had allowed him to function despite his impairment, and he flung open the linen closet, eyeing stacks of neatly folded sheets and blankets. Without hesitating, he turned and grabbed ahold of the offensively bright sheets covering the tacky bed. and tugged. The fitted sheets came loose easier than he’d expected them to, and he stumbled backwards, linens in hand. A head turned over his shoulder told him that she was completely at a loss.

“What are you doing?”

He clambered onto the mattress, shoes still on, and extended a hand. Realization burned bright in her eyes.

“We’re going to have fun.”

There was a moment of hesitation, but she squeezed his hand firmly, and let him pull her close. For a second, she wobbled, and years of worrying about her breaking an ankle surged up, but her hands grabbed at his biceps.

“I’m okay. I’m okay.”

He nodded, and slid down to grab at her hands.

(The better to hold you by, my dear.)

It wasn’t like he was a stranger to creaking bedsprings and sweaty bodies held close on a mattress, but this was fun too, in its own way. Long hair flapped in his face, and something loud echoed through the room. For a moment, he thought that the braying was the telltale sound of police sirens before he looked down and realized what it was. He’d never seen Satsuki look so carefree. Her hands squeezed his tightly and she laughed again, and if he closed his eyes, he could almost think it was her-

Something tiny and shiny caught the corner of his eye, and he faltered. The smile on Satsuki’s face slid off.

“Is there something wrong?”

Uzu didn’t answer. Instead, he climbed off, leaving her to scramble behind him.

“Uzu?”

He rummaged in his bag, searching for something.

“Is everything alright?”

"Hey, Sats. You miss high school at all?” He brandished something triumphantly. Satsuki’s eyes gleamed. In his hand, he held a sharpie marker, and he tossed the pen cap over his shoulder. In large block letters, he carefully spelt out two words that had gotten him in trouble before.

“Huh. Classy. They’re going to have to strip that wallpaper, you know.”

“Hey, ‘fuck you’ is a classic. And we’re not the ones paying for it.”

“...where’s the giant penis to go along with it?”

“Impatient, aren’t you?” He tossed the pen in her direction, and she fumbled for it in the air. “Do it yourself. It’s kind of fun, actually.”

She laughed again, a little more tired this time, as she tossed the pen back. “No thanks. I can’t do it in good conscience.”

“Live a little!” He reached into the desk and grabbed ahold of a handful of notepads and threw them into the air, throwing his arms wide. “Shit, blame it on me. Your mother’s already going to be stuck paying for this damn suite, and it can’t be cheap. The tabloids will hate us no matter what we do, the rumors will still be there in the morning. There’s nothing left to lose.” He clambered back onto the bed, arm extended. “Just leave it to me.”

This time, she didn’t hesitate to take his hand.

“So this is how the fucktruck dies. About time.”

“The trashmobile is being taken off for repairs, Matoi, not towards the scrapper.”

“Huh. Good fuckin’ luck trying to salvage that scrap heap.”

The five of them stood in the parking lot as the tow truck beeped and backed away. Ira extended a hand to wave at the man driving.

“Thank you for the favor, Uncle.”

His uncle nodded in response, having never been a man of many words. It’d been exceptionally kind of him to make the three hour drive up across state lines for him, and yet he had, without complaint. That was the sort of man he was- stern, generous, and above all,

quiet. He'd contrasted comedically with the ragtag group watching him drive away, trashed van dragging behind him. Ryuko shivered, rubbing her arms before Mako threw an arm around her waist in an attempt to warm her up.

"Hey, thanks. D'you guys have fun today?"

"Yeah! I picked out tons of cute clothes, and I got some things I think you'll like, and Tsumugu bought the new GTA game, and I helped Ira pick out a gift for Uzu-"

"Wait, is it his birthday?"

"Yeah! We got him a gift card to Taco Bell!"

"And a few new shirts, and some cufflinks." Ira cleared his throat, noticeably red. "I wanted to go for something a bit more dignified, but Mankan- er, Mako, made a pretty watertight argument. I couldn't disagree with her logic."

"Well, she's pretty used to hanging around piece of shit stoners, so," Ryuko shrugged. "Probably for the best. Hey, wish him luck for me, Gamagoori, I don't have his number. He's down in Vegas, right?"

"Yes. We'll be heading down to meet them in a few days. In the meantime, it's probably best we all exchange information, since it looks like we'll be sticking together for the next few months."

"Right."

The five of them huddled together, phones out, as he sent off the contacts. He averted his eyes from the visible cleavage Mako showcased when she leaned over, and instead focused on her hair, dangling in her face.

"Hey, do you think this puppy emoji is better for Mr. Inumuta, or this one?"

"Hm?" Her voice snapped him out of his reverie, and he looked into sweet brown eyes and extended phone. "Uh, that one. It's not as cute, but it suits him better."

"Okay! I'm gonna put this frog one next to your name, because it's cuter. I have trouble reading sometimes, and the emojis remind me of who everyone is. Y'know, 'cause *gama* means toad in Japanese, and-"

"Yeah, I know." His cheeks ached, and it took the stunned looks on the faces of Senketsu, Tsumugu and Ryuko to realize he was grinning. "That works fine too, I guess."

Mako crossed her arms and bounced on her toes, clearly excited. "I can't believe this is official. We're really doing this!"

"Yay," Tsumugu and Ryuko deadpanned simultaneously.

"We should have, like, a group handshake, or like, that selfie we couldn't take on Friday," Mako bubbled, practically vibrating from excitement. "Ryuko, look what I bought."

“Huh? I- is that a selfie stick?”

Mako triumphantly brandished a wand from the depths of her backpack, complete with hearts on it. “It’s Sailor Moon themed. Do you remember when we were in high school, and-”

Matoi looked bright red. “Not important right now, Mako.”

Tsumugu groaned. “What is it with this glittery twee shit you’re on, Mankanshoku?”

“Hush. No griping at me. You can complain when you can beat me on Rainbow Road.”

“I said I’d take you to the mall, and I did. The debt is paid.”

“Just smile for once, ya dang nerd. Ira, you stand behind Ryuko. Senketsu, you stand on that side. Tsumugu, come in close, and freakin’ smile, I know you know how to do that- there we go. Say cheese.”

Protests aside, Mako Mankanshoku was good at getting what she wanted, and even he had to smile into the camera when the light went off.

Alternating between gleeful, childlike destruction and immaturity, his tie disappeared somewhere in the ruckus, and the pins holding up Satsuki’s hair were lost. By the time they grew dizzy and collapsed onto the floor, the suite was a mess of strewn clothing, spilled makeup, and dirty footprints. Breathless and laughing, Satsuki rolled off the mattress and onto the carpet, still panting from exertion.

“I haven’t jumped on a bed since I can remember. My mother was never big on… childish indulgences.”

“Ya gotta lighten up sometimes, y’know? Cut loose every once in a while. But we got a big day tomorrow. You take the bathroom first, okay?”

Satsuki blinked slowly, but the smile on her face suited her features more than her perpetual frown. “You sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll just shower in the morning, okay?”

“Okay.”

Uzu gave her what he hoped was a reassuring grin, and watched with undisguised fondness as she tottered off into the adjacent room, heels in hand. The gentleness slid off his features as soon as the door clicked shut behind her, though, and he counted to ten in his head before clambering back onto the bed. The alcohol showed in the wobble of his legs, but his liver had already cleaned out his bloodstream, enough that when he balanced on the edge of the

headboard, he didn't teeter. Only practice could allow him to do this tipsy, still, and he was careful when he stretched out his hand. It was just… out of reach…

Whoever she'd hired, they'd been sloppier than usual- perhaps she'd assumed he'd hump anything on two legs that smiled at him? It took only a scrape of his nails to dislodge the tiny camera that had been concealed by the closest light fixture. He couldn't help but wrinkle his nose. Everyone who knew anything about cinematography knew a bird's eye view would look horrid as an angle. How tacky.

"Nice try," he muttered to himself. The words sounded flat in the ruins of the bedroom, and suddenly their rampage seemed a lot more like a toddler's childish tantrum.

Still, he reassured himself, *she'd be the one footing the bill. Anything to stick it to her.*

Unease hovered in his chest, and eyes roved anxiously across the room. Something thing glinted at him from under a large mirror. The obscenities they'd scrawled in fifty dollar lipstick made something inside him feel hollow, especially when he spotted the gleaming red light peeking out from within the sculpted golden frame. That too, was easy to pry from the wall.

All this damage for what? They'd pay for this later, anyway.

He stooped to peel another miniature camera off the wallpaper. They were everywhere. Ragyo Kiryuin was thorough, at least. A quick survey of the room granted him another four, hidden in the dresser, the headboard carving, across the room by the television. and one across the hall from the bathroom. As he pulled the final camera off the wall, it gave a sad beep, and all the tiny red lights flickered and went dark. Whatever they were, it was safe to assume they were connected, and with some luck, hadn't sent off their information yet. He toyed with the tiny wires protruding from their backs.

There was no way she didn't know that he knew by now, so planting them here was more than just a coincidence. It was a warning. A *'stay in line'*, if you would, and it was then Uzu felt the weight of their actions press down on him.

They would most certainly pay *dearly* for what they'd done.

A voice, however, snapped him out of his reverie, and the hand holding the cameras clenched tight out of instinct.

"Uzu? Do you need to use the bathroom?"

He whirled around. Satsuki stood, backlit, in the doorframe of the bathroom. Uzu hoped his surprise didn't register as alarm, but she smiled sleepily in his direction, and he exhaled in relief.

"Yeah, I gotta take a leak. Don't worry about me. Go to bed, Satsuki."

If she responded, he didn't notice in his haste to get into the bathroom. The door clicked shut behind him, and he was finally able to start breathing, panic spewing into the air and out of

his lungs like the carbon dioxide he exhaled.

When he opened his hand again, the camera's indents had cut red marks into the soft skin of his palms, slick with sweat and anxiety. When they clattered to the ground, he couldn't help but think of a rattlesnake's signature sound.

Still, they made a satisfying crunching noise when he crushed them under his heel. Even after he felt his shoe touch the floor, he kept grinding until he felt the glass turn to powder against the tiles. The scraping of sand and wire and metal echoed off the walls of the bathroom unpleasantly. If he had to give this suite a rating, he'd definitely commend it on it's incredible acoustics. Perhaps they would be better suited to a couple that wanted to hear their own obscenities echoed back at them. The only dirty talk to be heard was the muted swearing under his breath as he pressed the offending material deeper into the floor.

A knock of the door set his heart rate pulsing violently in his chest, sweat beading on his forehead immediately.

"Uzu?"

"Yeah, come in," he managed, forcing his voice to sound halfway normal. "I'm decent."

A head poked in through the doorway. Wrapped in one of the thick white comforters, Satsuki looked more like a marshmallow than one of the most terrifyingly successful women in the entertainment industry. Maybe it was the late hour, or the champagne, but her voice was soft when she spoke and her features seemed sweeter, somehow.

"Thank you, for everything."

"'s no problem, Sats," he piped, easygoing grin spreading across his face on instinct. "You know I love you."

She didn't offer anything in return. Instead, she shuffled closer, significantly less threatening in bare feet and linens. He peered down in curiosity as she approached, and leaned in when she reached up on her tiptoes. Her lips were almost fever warm, but that he could chalk up to the alcohol for sure, and they were soft when they pressed against his cheek in a gesture of comradery.

"Take care of yourself too, okay?"

Satsuki swayed as she spoke, and his hands instinctively grasped her by the arms. The laugh she let out in response was gentler than he'd ever heard from her, but her face turned serious as the giggles faded away.

"I mean it, Uzu. You have to take care of yourself. You always try to pull some stupid… stupid self-sacrificing garbage stunts, and you have to protect yourself..."

"Don't worry. Just go to sleep, ya damn lush." He resisted the urge to pat her head, and instead settled for a gentle nudge to the shoulder. "We have work in the morning."

She let out a groan of protest, but the flutter of her eyelids were unmistakably from exhaustion. The sleep deprivation and excitement of the night was getting to her.

“Promise me.”

“I promise, Satsuki. Go to sleep.”

“Mnnn.” She shuffled back out the door and offered him a radiant smile before she turned away. “You know, you can share the bed with me, if you want.”

“It’s okay, I’ll take the loveseat. You kick in your sleep, anyway.” He stuck his tongue out at her, and was relieved to see she was still enough of herself to roll her eyes at his immaturity. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Uzu.”

It wasn’t until the door clicked shut behind him that he was able to exhale and move his foot, leg cramping from the necessity of keeping it absolutely still. The remnants of the cameras clacked against the floor when he moved away, dislodging from the rubber of his soles. She didn’t need to know. They didn’t need to know.

After all, they, at least, deserved to be able to sleep at night.

Chapter End Notes

My blog is satsukichan on tumblr! Feel free to drop asks/ask questions/send in headcanons!

ukulele anthem

Chapter Summary

> *Sid Vicious played a four-string Fender bass guitar, and couldn't sing*
> *And everybody hated him, except the ones who loved him*
> *A ukulele has four strings, but Sid did did not play ukulele*
> *He did smack, and probably killed his girlfriend Nancy Spungen*

Chapter Notes

> Exactly two months later than anticipated and twice as long as long as intended, chapter eight. Warnings for a graphic description of a panic attack in the second half!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I hate Uzu Sanageyama, and want nothing more than to kick him in the balls hard enough to make him choke on them. He looks like an asshole.”

The Akechi Incident tag on Twitter was always a trip, and it wasn’t often she agreed with their fans (her face contorted in response to several lewd tweets about Satsuki as she skimmed through them), but...

“God, oh my god, oh my *god, yes*-”

The cheap porno dialogue had been funny for the first two minutes of it, but now she was starting to regret not picking up earplugs when she’d gone to the convenience store. If there was one thing she hated more than anything, it was having to share a wall with him, especially after Ragyo had had them moved to another, even skeezier, hotel. Satsuki had apologized to them all profusely, but regardless, here they were, scratchy sheets and suspicious stains to complete the image of a trashy rock band. Rumors abounded as to what exactly they’d done to destroy their last room, but whatever it was, they were stuck in regular, low-grade inns for the next few weeks, or until Shiro sucked up to her sufficiently.

(Okay, so maybe it was a single stain, almost impossible to see in the dim lighting, that she’d caught on the wall, and perhaps she was being spoiled. Still, she wasn’t exactly about to take her chances on anything, or a blacklight to the walls either, for that matter. She valued her beauty sleep.)

Or whatever sort of sleep she was going to get with the shitty moaning leaking through the plaster.

Wasn't it late? Shouldn't he be sleeping?

The repetitive creaking of the box springs was only occasionally punctuated with a stuttered moan, a sharp gasp, and murmured words she couldn't make out. The cadence made it clear who was speaking, and she screwed her eyes shut and rolled over onto her side, reaching under her pillow for her phone. The light burned her retinas, but the clock was clear- it was almost three in the morning, and his muted baritone ratcheted up a few decibels. Through watering eyes, she squinted at her screen in hopes of finding a distraction. Spam emails, a letter from her mother, thousands of likes on her newest selfies, but nothing interesting enough to drown out the sound of his voice rising along with his partner's.

"Christ, oh god, oh my god, fuck me *harder*-"

"Shut the fuck up," Nonon whispered to no one in particular. "If you're really about to come, don't fucking announce it to the whole hotel."

An uncomfortably loud groan rang through the thin wall, the voice painfully familiar. She gritted her teeth and tried to focus on her phone screen, to no avail.

"Touch me there, touch me *there*, touch me- *ahh*, god, *god*, oh my god, oh my *god, fuck… fuck, fuck, holy shit, oh my god*-"

The pillows at this hotel were dense, but not quite enough to fully muffle the sound of his panting, even when folded over her head. Eyes fixed on Satsuki with envy as she slept in the adjacent bed, four hundred dollar headphones blocking out all sound.

(*"My phone will wake me up at my normal time, and besides, in case of an emergency, you can shake me awake.*"

"*Why the headphones*?"

"*Experience.*")

They weren't over just yet. No, she must've pissed off someone in a higher place, because the keening high pitched voice spiked one last time, all breathless moans and nails digging into backs.

"I'm gonna- I'm gonna come, *I'm gonna come, I'm*-"

As she contemplated running over to knock on his door, there was another drawn out groan, accompanied with a few violent thuds as her wall shook, the neighboring bed ramming into her wall. Dust spewed from the ceiling, and she grit her teeth, eye squeezed shut. The shaking stopped, to be replaced by thinly muffled heavy panting, and the sound of a bedspring creaking as bodies rolled off the mattress. She couldn't catch the rest of the conversation before the telltale noise of the hotel room creaking open echoed through the hall. There was less than a minute's span of time between the muffled steps past her door and the sound of the shower running in his room, and she finally untensed. Finally, peace and, well, relative quiet.

Running water always made her sleepy, however, and the hour sure wasn't helping. Before she passed out, though, she had to make sure of one thing. Tired, fumbling fingers made sure to type out a single text before she forgot.

(●o'∪`o)ノ—♪: Oi, monkey: Fuck you

As her eyes fluttered shut, there was the squeaking noise of the pipes shutting off the water. Less than a minute later, there was a quiet chuckle before the dimming phone lit up with his response.

└@(･ɪ･)@┐: she already did that for me

└@(･ɪ･)@┐: sorry, jakuzure

(●o'∪`o)ノ—♪: Shove it

(●o'∪`o)ノ—♪: You know what I mean

(●o'∪`o)ノ—♪: Nobody's particularly interested in hearing everything you want her to do to you

(●o'∪`o)ノ—♪: These walls are tissue paper thin, you self-satisfied douche

└@(･ɪ･)@┐: did you really hear everything

(●o'∪`o)ノ—♪: I didn't know you liked having your hair pulled

└@(･ɪ･)@┐: sorry

Nonon's eyes roved over the texts before continuing.

(●o'∪`o)ノ—♪: Also, sorry to break it to you, but she was tooooootally faking it

It was a testament to the fragility of male pride that his next text arrived almost immediately.

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : was not

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : i went down on her for like

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : half an hour before we fucked

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : i think she was just loud

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Liar. I’d have heard her

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : her mouth was a bit busy at the moment

Nonon gagged.

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: TMI, dickhead

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : i know it might not look like it, but ive got an ego too, yknow

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: I care less about your big head and overblown sense of self-worth when you’re not smashing your furniture against my wall in the middle of the night

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Why don’t you just jack off like the rest of us?

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : nobodys accused me of having any sense of self-worth in a while

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : im kinda flattered

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : but really, wheres the fun in rubbing one out when you can have company?

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: People need to sleep

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: At least bang someone who’s quieter

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓: what, you volunteering?

There was a pause, and a second text.

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓: that was inappropriate

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓: sorry

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓: i might be drunker than i thought

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Shove it, you dense ape. Don’t flatter yourself.

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Maybe find one of your thirsty twink fanboys?

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Will they let me sleep?

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓: nuh-uh

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓: im really loud when im with dudes

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: EW

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓: was that too TMI

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: The last hour’s been TMI

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Fuck off

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Go to sleep

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: We have practice tomorrow and you’d better show

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : will you miss me if i don’t

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: When are you gonna text me a

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: ;)

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: ‘and then what’

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Already? Let’s get this over with

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Wanna play twenty questions?

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: No, I’m not a virgin

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Next question

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : the way you and matoi are always mackin on each other id be impressed if you were

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Don’t try me

She heard a muffled chuckle, and the sound of something being knocked over, followed by a solid twenty seconds of muted swearing.

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Did you stub your toe?

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : its dark in here and i might be a liiiiiiiiiiiiiiiittle bit drunker than i thought i was

┗@(･ɪ･)@┓ : double drunk

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: Go to sleep, dude

└@(･ɪ･)@┐: fineeeeeeeeeeee

(●o’∪`o)ノ—♪: I’m serious

It was about time she took her own advice. Eyes fluttered shut, and she was finally drifting off when a buzz woke her up again.

└@(･ɪ･)@┐: gn nonon

She ignored her phone until the light dimmed, went black, and her vision faded as she lost consciousness.

Ryuko stood with her hands on her hips, critically surveying the whole mess. The room was a fucking disaster, of course- after all, they were the ones in it. No cheap room in the history of rock music ever looked good with four punks living there, but it was a testament to how gross it was that part of her was starting to miss the Seattle Sunshine Motor Inn. And with the roach eggs she'd found in the seams of the wallpaper, that wasn't an easy thing to miss.

Luckily, at least now she had something to do during the day, so at least they weren't stuck there all the time. So what if the shower water looked like piss and smelled funny? Nobody looked at her funny when she hotboxed the room, and there was free coffee. At least now, she could afford deodorant, and nothing was too bad when she had a pretty girl to squeeze.

So, all in all, not the worst she'd ever done, in terms of hotel rooms- or lovers, for that matter.

Tsumugu had called her delirious. It probably helped that, unlike him, she was getting laid on the regular. She’d made the mistake of poking fun at the fact that he wouldn’t be seeing Aikuro for a few weeks, and Senketsu had ‘accidentally’ been stowed on a flight to Alaska. But if there was one thing picking fights had taught her, it was that arguing with underpaid call center employees wouldn’t help her, and with enough patience and gritted teeth, he’d managed to make it to Phoenix with little fanfare and in one piece. She hoped.

It was about time she checked, anyway.

The enormous aluminum case dragged a pattern through the matted carpet beneath her feet as she hauled it closer towards her bed. She hummed under her breath as she nimbly undid the latches holding the box closed, and there was the barest pneumatic hiss as it clicked open. Inside, neatly folded into himself, was Senketsu, bare as the day he was first activated.

"Sorry, dude."

Kudos to Doctor Matoi- despite his size, his body was less dead weight, due to an ultra light skeleton made of… something, and- well, she'd never really paid attention to the science behind his research whenever she'd visited from school, something she'd always regretted since. But there was no time for regrets when she had tune-ups to do.

In the leather case she'd tucked into his arms were dozens of tools that ranged from the ordinary- flathead screwdrivers, exchangeable heads- to the suspicious, to things easily mistaken for torture devices. Pulling his body into the space between her spread legs, she let his head fall forward, fingers combing his hair to find where lab grown flesh met metal again. There was a hidden seam that easily opened with only the gentlest prodding with a scalpel, and beneath it lay a metal plate that opened to access his nervous system.

This was a dangerous and very delicate procedure, her father had told her over one of their rare dinners together. *Mess up this part, and you could permanently damage the memory of the subject.*

Every time she checked up on him, she willed her fingers not to shake, even when her palms sweat. The screws were so small, they could easily be mistaken for tiny bumps, but she'd done this enough times before to find them with her fingertips. The first of many tiny screws came out easily enough, carefully placed into the open jar she'd placed besides her. Then another, then another. Tedious work, maybe, but simple enough as long as she tried not to think of the fact that she'd peeled off flesh and skin from her best friend's skull, and was now in the process of opening up his head.

The penultimate screw came loose just as a knock startled her from her reverie. At the door, the now-familiar bass of Ira Gamagoori rattled the frame.

"Do you mind us coming in?"

"Yeah, sure. I'm decent."

She worked on loosening a particularly stubborn screw as the door clicked open. The telltale shuffling of several pairs of feet caught her attention, and she looked up to find three figures standing by the entrance, gingerly sidestepping abandoned articles of clothing. Iori's presence was to be expected, but accompanying him were Gamagoori, head precariously close to the ceiling, and Sanageyama, hands in pockets and clearly curious.

"Three's a crowd, haven't you heard?"

"We're just here to make sure everything's okay."

"One of you was enough to do that."

Iori cleared his throat. “I heard you’d gotten Senketsu back and I was, er, curious.” His eyes roved over the unconscious android slumped forward. “I hope you don’t mind my intrusion.”

“That’s fair. But what’s with you?” Ryuko spared a moment to jerk her chin at Uzu, who was clearly surprised at being addressed.

“Ira doesn’t want me wandering around the hotel before the show. Thinks I might get in trouble.”

“Huh. Well, nice to see you guys, I guess. I’m kinda busy right now.”

“I hope we’re not interrupting you?” Gamagoori seemed a bit stiff, eyes nervously darting around. “We just wanted to make sure you’d be ready for tonight.”

“Nah.” Delicately, she dropped the final screw into the jar and pried the plate open. “I could do this in my sleep.”

“Where’s Mankanshoku?”

Ah, of course. “Bathroom, I think. Yo, Mako, are you good?"

“Did someone call my name?” A tiny head poked out of the door, peering around the frame. “I’ll be out in a moment.”

“Ah, uh, good morning, *MaaaaaANKANSHOKU*-”

She let the door swing open, wearing nothing but a skirt. The three stiffened and jerked their heads away immediately. Gamagoori slapped an overlarge hand over Sanageyama's face, earning a long string of swears from the latter.

Mako looked completely nonplussed to see them.

"Hi."

"I thought you said everyone was decent," Gamagoori muttered. His face was averted so completely, he was staring at the wall, flush noticeable even under the dim light. "Why is Mankanshoku wandering around topless?"

Ryuko barely spared them a glance. "First off, it's our room. And if you'd bothered to check, you'd know she's wearing pasties, jackass."

“I’m a gentleman,” he grumbled in response. “I wasn’t planning on looking.”

"Regular bras hurt my shoulders," Mako said blithely. "Sports bras are much more comfortable. The pasties are just insurance, though- Ryuko doesn’t let me leave without them."

“I worry. The daisies are cute, though. Mikisugi?”

“He gave me what’s gotta be like, a lifetime supply. Some of them are glittery.”

“Nice.”

“Where’d you pack my clothes, Ryuko?”

“Blue bag, top zipper.”

“Thanks.”

As she spoke, Mako dug through a one of the suitcases on the floor and yanked one free. To their credit, none of the visitors moved a single muscle until the telltale snap of elastic against skin sounded through the room, and they turned back, still visibly awkward.

“Anyway,” Ira managed, “We brought you breakfast.”

“Sweet. What’d you bring us?”

“Bagels and spread. Coffee and juice, some fruit… nothing special. You all skipped breakfast, so I thought it was my duty to make sure you guys ate.”

“‘preciate it.”

Ira side-eyed her as she struggled with a clasp. “You sure you don’t need help with that? I know my specialty isn’t android tech, but I did fix cars as a teenager…”

Ryuko didn’t hesitate before yanking out a handful of wires from the back of Senketsu’s head. Behind her, he heard three very audible intakes of breath, and a prolonged groan.

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

“Oh, so *now* you decide not to cover my face?” Uzu was very audibly upset. “I know what a tit looks like, but you don’t think, ‘hey, maybe my buddy might not like seeing a nice dude get his brains torn out’? Don’t you remember how badly I reacted to Alien?”

“I, er,”

“What if I’d been *high*, Ira? Would you really wanna deal with that? You wanna deal with me crying?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t do drugs, then-”

“He’s beautiful,” Shiro whispered reverently. The boys turned to look at him with a mix of horror and disgust plastered onto their faces, clear as day.

“Is this what gets your rocks off, Iori?” Uzu didn’t even try to hide the amusement in his voice. “You into dressing Houka up like a robot?”

“Bite me, Sanageyama. Senketsu’s a technological miracle, and we’re all extremely lucky to be in the presence of an actual sentient android. I hope you understand how unbelievably rare true androids are.”

“Alright, geek.”

“Okay, you two. Calm down.” Gamagoori’s voice was still a bit strained, but there was a ring of authority that the other two didn’t question. “Let’s not intrude on their space any longer than necessary.”

Still, none of their eyes moved from Senketsu as she started dutifully plugging wires into the small box she’d hooked up to a laptop. The computer beeped, and then a long string of binary code filled the entire screen, moving much too fast for anyone to catch it. Transfixed, no one budged until the pop-up came up, telling them the diagnostic test was done.

“Wouldn’t a proper full runthrough of Senketsu require a supercomputer? I mean, there’s gotta be so much data that goes into making him run…” Shiro was very clearly trying to sound less fascinated than he was. “Is there a backup?”

If Ryuko felt his questions were nosy, she didn’t mention it.

“Yeah. There is. My father’s laboratory has an entire backup of him we update every few months. It’s a really tedious process, but y’know, in case anything ever happened to him… this is just a quick check of all of his startup drivers and stuff. High altitude damage and all that. He should be fine, though, I’m pretty sure his carrying case could withstand a direct hit from a missile.”

“Wow,” Shiro murmured. His jaw was a little slacker than usual. “Thank you for letting us witness that.”

“It’s nothing. Thanks for the food.” Ryuko quipped, gesturing towards Mako devouring bread and cheese. “I’ll see you guys later, I guess.”

They turned to leave, but halfway there, Uzu suddenly whipped around.

“By the way, Matoi, I thought you might be interested.” Something large and made of paper whizzed past her ear to land behind her on her mattress. “We brought you a copy. They gave us a lot of free ones.”

On her bed lay a glossy magazine, brightly colored and covered in bolded text. Ryuko scrunched up her nose in confusion.

“Huh? What’s this garbage?”

When he responded, Uzu sounded a little hurt. “It’s this month’s Vanity Fair issue. Look, I’m on the cover with Satsuki. That’s me, smoldering.”

As he spoke, he gestured to the copy he held in his hands. Just as promised, the two were on the cover, dressed to the nines. Satsuki looked like an untouchable form of light become solid. Uzu looked like he was about to start taking his shirt off.

“Nice.”

If they picked up on how flat her voice was, they didn’t mention it.

“I haven’t read the article, but the interview in there should prove interesting.” He stretched a hand out cheerfully. “We’ll see you later.”

There was an awkward moment of hesitation where she wasn’t sure to shake or bump, but his knuckles pressed gently against hers without pause, and then they were all squeezing out of the room. Despite the tight fit, the place suddenly felt enormous without them. But there was work to be done, and the moment passed quickly.

“You want breakfast, Mako?”

“Mmrpgh.”

“Is that a yes?” Ryuko turned to find her with a mouthful of cheese and bread.

Mako swallowed thickly. “Less of a yes, more like an ‘already on it’.”

“Well, they might as well be useful somehow. I’m going to be busy booting Senketsu up for a while, can you get me a bagel?” She squinted at the tangled set of wires poking out the back of his head. “Gotta make sure he’s up for performing tonight.”

“No problem! Open up wide!”

Crumbs aside, this was probably not proper protocol for android repair, but if it meant that she could eat while she worked, she had no problem with it.

Show days were inevitably a mess of Starbucks drinks and Red Bull cans, even as they tuned instruments and went over their setlist. Was everything in place? Had she sealed her makeup so it wouldn’t melt under the lights? Shiro paced back and forth endlessly when he wasn’t snapping at roadies or juggling tasks, with nobody having the heart to tell him to stop. Even she couldn’t bring herself to remind him how much pacing got on her nerves, what with the way his eyes darted nervously, the overcaffeinated product of endless stress. After they ended their tour with the New Year, she hoped he especially would be allowed to take a break.

But for the moment, he was off being busy somewhere else, and the only options presented to her in the meantime were catching up on her social media, and perusing the shiny copies of Vanity Fair that had been left on the table in a neat stack. Nonon took one look at them and thought about how everyone must be talking about the interview.

So logically, she scrolled Twitter and ignored looking at her notifications for as long as she could, the magazines glinting shinily in her peripheral vision.

After enough mentions with the hashtag, though, curiosity got the better of her. She flipped through the endless stream of advertisements until the huge, bold text taking up half a page showed up near the centerfold, accompanied by a page sized photo of the two of them leaning against each other.

Nosebleeds, Coke (Floats) and Swarovski: Beauty and the Beat- Hollywood's Greatest Power Couple (That isn't)

by Shinjiro Nagita

This was going to be *fun*. She licked her thumb and flipped to the next page.

Goofus and gallant sit across the table from me, in the flesh, a cartoon strip taken form. It's the only explanation for the stunning contrast between them- one, raised under the spotlight, the other, the classic dark horse. They are exactly seven minutes late, and they apologize profusely- LA traffic's a bitch and a half. However, I'm incredibly impressed by their punctuality- I neglect to mention I'd only just sat down myself.

They insisted on talking to me at a coffee shop before their flight took off, which, in all honesty, I can't blame them for. The schedules of the rich and famous are infamously tight-packed, and these two are no exception. But there's a maturity to them- the lead vocalist and guitarist of Akechi Incident, Satsuki Kiryuin, and the back-up vocalist and lead bassist, Uzu Sanageyama- that is rarely found in those so famous, so young. Not to say they don't have their playful quirks. In fact, as we speak, Uzu takes a momentary break to order himself a slice of cake.

"It's my twenty-third birthday," he clarifies, with a mouth full of red velvet. "Want some?" He offers a forkful to both of us- we both shake our heads.

"I don't like to eat before flights," Satsuki admits. "I get sick easily. I don't need that story on the cover of The Inquirer- 'Kiryuin loses her lunch!'. It'd be a hassle." Still, she allows herself a small bite regardless, muttering under her breath about how she has a soft spot for cream cheese frosting. He smirks but doesn't comment on it, and the move feels natural.

This is part of the charm that makes them so addicting. Seeing the way they interact with ease, it's easy to believe they've known each other forever, when in fact, it's barely been six years since Uzu joined the band ("I was kind of a wayward teen," he jokes, and laughs to himself between bites of cake). Despite having five members, all clearly personalities to be reckoned with, it's these two that seem to shine brightest, for very different reasons. Satsuki brushes a strand of hair out of her face as she takes a sip from her teacup, and an original Swarovski piece glitters on her wrist in the sunlight.

"It was a company gift. My mother used to model for them, apparently," she explains. "I thought it looked good with my dress."

The only biological child of eighties' pop sensation, Ragyo Kiryuin, Satsuki Kiryuin, age 23, has very big Louboutins to fill. Not only did her mother break records and make history repeatedly, she managed to cross borders, becoming the most internationally prolific Japanese pop artist since Yoko Ono, and the most scandalous ("My mother

prefers controversial,") since Madonna. In fact, there are too many people that the elder Kiryuin has been compared to, and yet none manage to touch her and her mountain of accomplishments.

But not only was this beauty a shrewd businesswoman and brilliant performer, she also shined in the scientific community for her unrivaled genius, leading even her worst critics to dub her 'the female Bill Gates'. Post her modeling and singing career, Ragyo went on to found REVOCS corporation, which, at the current time of writing, does not only include the largest musical label in the world, but the labs responsible for revolutionary advances in artificial intelligence and medicine. As if developing the robotic technology that allows famed public figures such as Junketsu, honorary representative of REVOCS, to exist, weren't enough, she also founded the multi-billion dollar brand of the same name, of whom she is, of course, lead designer.

While she didn't follow in her mother's designer heel footsteps musically, they share the same traits of brains and beauty ("I've been taking college courses since I was sixteen, and if I ever take a break, I'd like to get a PhD,"), willingness to work hard ("I practice for three hours a day, both guitar and vocals,") and, so she says, brawn.

"My mother never let me get complacent," she states, spoon clinking against her saucer as she sets it down. "Of course, I had singing lessons, and piano, and violin, but I was taking gymnastics and dance as soon as I could stand. I was learning French and German and Russian as soon as I could understand Japanese and English, and I started taking judo before my fifth birthday. I was also really into fencing for a time… my mother insisted I take kyudo, but I found kendo more suited to my personal tastes."

At the mention of the martial art, Uzu's ears perk up. Everything about him contrasts so comically to his prodigy bandmate, it verges into performance art. Where Satsuki drinks black tea, unsweetened, with cream, he takes his iced coffee with five sugars and no milk. Where her hair is natural and perfectly conditioned where it falls past her hips, his is dyed the seaweed green he's become known for, scruffy and tied back into a ponytail. His low cut shirt reveals the rose epaulet tattoos covering his collarbones, and his leather jacket, pushed to his elbows, is patched to hell and reveals just a hint of the arm sleeves he's become a popular model for. Pop culture references and pin-ups are sewed together with intricate lines and patches of pure blackwork. He's the quintessential bad boy, from his smirk to the Ray Bans he sports, perched on his head, from the lit Camel dangling from his hand. But he's clearly passionate when he speaks, eyes lighting up immediately.

"I was really into kendo when I was a kid. I quit when I started high school, but, like, it's probably for the best."

How so? I ask, and he grins widely and gestures towards his companion.

"I'd have never gotten serious about the bass if I hadn't."

His words are punctuated from a drag from his cigarette, the third since we started talking. It feels more like a prop than a need for nicotine at this point, but at my request,

he carefully stubs it out and slides it back into the soft pack in his jacket. “Smoking calms my nerves,” he confirms, but settles back into his seat regardless.

Perhaps out of necessity- less than twenty-four hours before this interview, sexually explicit photos of him had flooded the internet. They both grimace when I bring it up.

“I’m not going to apologize for taking those,” Uzu says.

“It’s disgusting how people lack respect for public figures,” Satsuki adds. "We deserve our privacy, too."

Her disgust with the whole situation makes sense when taken into context. Besides the public embarrassment of her own friend, being the daughter of someone whose modeling career was ruined by not one, but two separate sex scandals, the leaked photos hits uncomfortably close to home. However, Uzu picks up on her dampened mood immediately, and moves to perk her up as soon as he can.

"I dunno if my private parts really count as private parts, honestly," he chirps, eliciting an annoyed eye roll from her. "This was unfortunate, but it's on me. I'll take responsibility for the photos, if not for their distribution. My public parts are-"

"Stop that."

The words are accompanied by a smack to his shoulder. They both laugh, heads leaning together. When viewed like this, it's not difficult to believe the rumors that their friendship isn't the only thing that the two have going on. They seem closer than most, though they insist there's nothing romantic between the two of them.

"We really are just friends," they insist in perfect unison. There is a pause before Uzu gestures towards her, and she clears her throat. "There's nothing of that sort between us."

"Friendly relationships between men and women are kinda rare in Hollywood, but I'd like to be able to call her one of my best friends."

"Likewise."

"I'm flattered," he says, and it does sound genuine. "I mean, I know nobody will believe it, especially given my reputation..."

Ah, yes. Uzu Sanageyama and his disposition for casual sex. The cherry on top of the bad boy image he’s perfected since he joined the band, a sex symbol for adolescent girls around the world. Between his controversial wet t-shirt cover for Rolling Stone at eighteen (titled, rather tackily, ‘Barely Legal’), his playgirl shoot, his drug use, and his ever-present smirk, it makes sense that he’d capture the hearts (amongst other body parts) of his fans, regardless of gender. Openly bisexual, he casually mentions his former partners, both romantic and sexual, as the topic comes up in conversation.

The two insist their relationship is strictly platonic, but shortly after this interview wrapped up, the two spent a night together in the honeymoon suite at the Mandarin, only to be told to not return in the morning. Say what they will, that seems like pretty damning evidence to-

Nonon grimaced and slapped the magazine shut immediately.

Without the article to distract her, she was at a loss of what to do. Legs swung loosely with the beat of the music Houka had put on the relieve the endless tension before a show, until he closed his laptop with a resolute click.

“You’re on edge, Jakuzure.”

“No, I’m not.”

She pulled her fingertips out of her mouth as she spoke. Failure to convince him was plastered all over his face.

“Stop chewing your nails, then. Please. You’re going to stress me out.”

“Can *anything* stress you out? Iori’s constantly on edge and you never seem affected by it.”

“I’m used to Shiro’s worrying, and I know how to calm him down. You, on the other hand…”

Nonon sighed. “I’m probably just a little wired from all the coffee. Don’t worry about me.”

“I never said I was worried about you. I said you were going to stress me out.”

Her voice was drier than a desert when she replied.

“Thanks.”

“You can take care of yourself. But if you insist on all the tapping noises and the leg shaking- one of those chair legs is shorter, and the clacking is driving me up the wall.”

The chair scraped unpleasantly against the floor as she stood abruptly, phone clutched to her chest. “I guess I’ll go bother someone else, then."

“That’d be nice. I appreciate your consideration, for once.”

It’d be too much effort to flip him off, so she settled for an irritated eye roll in his direction as she made for the door.

She knew where she was going, of course- the swarms of busy crewmen asking her that did not help her sour mood. The door with *her* name taped to it was closed, but she didn’t bother knocking. There was no point, after all- there were no secrets between them when it came to skin, and it wasn’t like anything could phase her at this point, anyway.

“Satsuki, I’m coming in-”

Satsuki stood in the middle of her dressing room in front of a floor to length mirror in her underwear, in the process of being laced into her longline. Any resolutions she'd made with herself to not stare went out the window as soon as she exhaled deeply, the gap in the back of the corset growing ever smaller.

"Nonon?"

It took her a moment to realize her jaw was hanging ajar, and she shook her head as if to clear any memories. "Yeah?"

"Please come in. Is everything alright?"

Shiro pulled the laces taut, and despite her attempts to keep eye contact, her eyes dropped to the stays tightening around her torso. The corset always did wonders for her figure, not that she needed it- mass displaced like ice cubes in a glass of water.

Had her mouth been this dry when she'd come in?

"Everything's fine," she said, fingers playing with the hem of her skirt. "I just came in to check up on you. Nothing in particular, just an update."

"I'm fine. I appreciate the sentiment, however."

Did her breasts always look this huge, or was it the way the underbust brought the rest of her in so neatly? She averted her eyes from the intricate busk, clasps straining against the satin, in a vain attempt to compose herself. "Anything I can help out with? I finished tuning everyone's instruments before I came in."

"Actually, you can. Have you seen Sanageyama around?"

Nonon's heart thudded down into the pit of her stomach.

"He's probably around. I dunno. I haven't seen him acting up much the past few weeks, y'know, besides the usual shit-"

"You looked exhausted this morning. Did he keep you up?' Satsuki's voice was crisp, and she could only sigh in response.

"He's really loud."

"I'm surprised you two didn't wake me up. If memory serves me correctly, you're pretty loud, too."

First confusion, then realization dawned on her as her entire body turned warm.

"No, not like that, I meant-"

"You never did have much patience for being kept up. I'm glad my headphones blocked out the yelling."

Behind her, Shiro very deliberately made eye contact. As she watched, he shook his head from side to side, ever so slowly, She could almost hear him deadpanning.

Nice one, Jakuzure.

Freudian slips aside, she carried on, with all the grace and dignity of a proper lady. “Should I go look for him?”

“If you don’t have anything better to do, go ahead.” She gestured for Shiro to tie the laces together and jerked her chin towards the door. “I’ll go check myself once I’m fully dressed. Best of luck.”

Nonon resisted the urge to snap unpleasantly at Shiro, who was now smirking at her from where he stood. “I will. I’ll see you in a bit.”

If she had one valid reason for self loathing, it was the way her pulse thudded painfully in her chest when she smiled in her direction.

It was almost relaxing to lay back in a seat and just read trashy magazines, for once. It wasn’t something she indulged in, often, but with Mako combing through her hair with her fingers, she felt at peace, for the first time in a while.

> *The two insist their relationship is strictly friendly, but shortly after this interview wrapped up, the two spent a night together in the honeymoon suite at the Mandarin, only to be told to not return in the morning. Say what they will, that seems like pretty damning evidence to anyone who suspects that they may be more than just friends. Their representative could not be reached for further comment when I called to ask about this.*
>
> *But for the moment, they seem content to just pal around. Uzu asks for a sip of her tea and offers his drink in return, earning a look of disgust when she takes him up on the offer. According to her, it’s much too sweet. He complains it’s bitter, but laughs and takes a sip anyway.*
>
> *“I know we look close now, but it wasn’t always like this,” he confesses. “I mean, we met under weird circumstances to say the least… I guess you could say we got off on the wrong foot.”*
>
> *“I’d say that’s putting it mildly,” Satsuki adds. “In your defense, it was a perfectly reasonable reaction to your situation, but…”*
>
> *They’re being vague. I ask for clarification, and they simply look at each other and laugh. “I thought she was trying to kidnap me or something when we met up,” Uzu admits. “It’s kind of a long story, honestly.”*

That sure does sound like a wild tale, so I try and press further, but they shake their heads, lips pressed tightly shut. Only a few feet away from us sits their manager, Shiro Iori, nervously stirring his tea. He's undoubtedly here to supervise, but he's a character himself, blond curls falling down his back. Youngest in the business, he's also Satsuki's oldest friend. He starts when I address him about it.

"Satsuki was always special," he says briskly, waving a hand.

The peace only magazines and friends could bring was shattered with a knock at the door. Tsumugu looked up from his copy of the magazine to squint in the general direction of the noise.

"Who is it?"

Satsuki Kiryuin's voice rung loud and clear.

"It's just me. May I come in?"

The members of Freshbloods looked at each other and shrugged.

"Yeah, come on in." Tsumugu's eyes dropped back down to his article as soon as the door opened, clearly transfixed.

"What brings you here, Kiryuin?" She set down the shiny paper to look at her, and Satsuki's face betrayed no emotion or hint at what she intended. In most people, that sort of neutral expression was intimidating. In Satsuki, it was about as approachable as she got.

"I have a favor to ask of you and your band members."

In the plushest seat of the dressing room, Mako was curled into a small ball, napping, but even she groggily poked her head over the armrest of her seat.

"Huh?"

Ryuko motioned for her to wipe off the drool off her cheek.

"Usually, you play for about an hour, an hour and a half or so, to amp up the crowds, at which point we switch in an finish the show."

"Yes," Ryuko said. "That's what opening bands do."

Satsuki ignored her sarcasm gracefully. "We might have a minor issue."

"Huh?"

"We can't exactly… find Sanageyama."

"And this is our problem, how? We're just opening for you guys. I'm sure he'll show up soon enough." Ryuko fiddled with the dog-eared edges of the magazine she'd set down. "We play for a bit, you guys take the stage, it's no big deal."

Satsuki cleared her throat. “About that.”

“... what is it?”

“If we can’t find him in time, we’re going to need you to keep playing.”

“Keep playing? What do you mean?”

“The show must go on, Matoi. If that means replacing him, so be it, but we do need to wait and see if he’ll show up.”

“So we have to stall for time?” Ryuko hissed. “No advance warning?”

Satsuki did not so much as blink in the face of her irritation. “He does this sometimes.”

“Yeah, well, it’s bullshit. He’s holding us up.”

“I’ll be sure to reprimand him when he arrives-”

“Are you his mother or his girlfriend?”

The other started at the sudden edge in her voice. Satsuki pursed her lips.

“Why do you ask?”

“‘cause, like, you shouldn’t baby him this much. If he’s not feeding you or fucking you, what does it matter? All he does, from what I’ve gathered, is cause you guys trouble. If you’re willing to deal with a liability like him, that’s fine, but when his shit starts inconveniencing others, maybe it’s time to reconsider everything. Get a new bassist or straighten him out. You keepin’ him around for personal reasons?”

When she replied, her voice was crisper than usual. “Our relationship is strictly professional.”

“Yeah, nothing says ‘professional’ like a honeymoon suite."

“You don’t have to believe me, but that’s the truth.”

“Whatever. Just figure your shit out, and don’t make me have to carry you guys. I’m not here to make friends, I’m here to make money.”

“Just do it this once. If he really can’t be found, I’ll have to ask one of you to sub in for him, though.”

“That’s fine with me. Find him, though. Don’t dump your responsibilities on me.”

“Thank you for your cooperation.”

She spoke without a trace of irony in her voice.

“Jeez, Kiryuin, chill. It’s not like I have a choice in the matter, anyway.” Ryuko settled back and sighed. “It’s not that big of a deal, anyway.”

As Satsuki turned to leave, however, a muffled buzzing noise broke out. Frowning, she reached into her jacket to retrieve her phone, vibrating loudly to the tune of the Blue Danube Waltz. The rest of the room's occupants watched with badly concealed interest as she mouthed 'excuse me' and held the phone to her ear.

"Ira? Yes… yes… no, we checked in there- hold up." The phone buzzed again, and she glanced at it before putting it back up against her face. "I'm getting another call from Inumuta. I'll call you back- yes, Houka, what is it?"

They watched her facial expression morph from calm, to confusion, to annoyance, to exasperation in a span of about twenty seconds.

"Have you tried- no, alright, I guess that does seem counterproductive… do not break the door down, just try talking to him. Huh. Okay, maybe just… is he sober?"

"Oi, Satsuki. What's going on?"

"Hang on just a second-" she pulled the phone away from her ear and pressed it into her chest instead. "We've got some good news and some bad news."

"Bad news first."

"He won't come out."

Ryuko wrinkled her nose in irritation.

"Okay, good news, then?"

"We found him, but he's barricaded himself in a bathroom and won't come out."

"Can't you just break down the door?"

"I don't think that's the wisest decision, at the moment…" She put the phone back to her ear. "I'll try and talk to him, Houka. In the meantime, make sure he doesn't do anything rash."

"Guess you gotta motor, then?"

Satsuki made a gesture that could have been a shrug. "Start setting up in the meantime. I'll keep you updated if anything changes."

"Right. Okay."

The door hadn't even closed behind her before they all turned to face each other in a practiced movement.

"What's *his* fuckin' deal?" Tsumugu grumbled. "Is he high?"

"I dropped acid once and freaked the fuck out. Might be something like that." Ryuko shrugged deeper into her seat and picked at a hangnail. "Hope he's okay."

“What’ll we do if he isn’t, though?” Mako leaned forward with her face in her hands, pouting. “Do we keep playing, or...?”

“It’s not optimistic to look at worst case scenarios,” Senketsu complained, speaking for the first time in a while. “Maybe he’s just having a… bad case of indigestion?”

“How’s a bad case of the shits any less counterproductive to playing a show than a bad trip?” Tsumugu didn’t look very pleased. “If he isn’t in a good state by the time we’re done, what do we do? Play covers all night?”

“We haven’t practiced that many, though.”

“Well, *maybe* if you hadn’t gotten lost-”

“Maybe if you’d put me on the right connecting flight-”

Ryuko took a deep breath and exhaled. “I’m the leader, and I say shut up. Leave the testosterone at the door. Let’s brainstorm.”

“I’m designed to be gender neutral.”

“Work with me here, Senketsu. Please. Let’s assume he doesn’t show up. We’re almost at the end of our setlist. What now?”

“We panic?”

“No, we *don’t* do that, Mako. I could always try and bully him out of the bathroom, but…” Ryuko trailed off.

“Why would he come out for you, and not them?”

“Tsumugu’s got a point,” Mako chirped. “You two don’t exactly have a deep relationship or whatever.”

“We got drunk and talked for a while once? And besides, I didn’t go to college for three years and take that many psych classes for nothing.”

“I thought you told me you’d barely declared your major when you dropped out.”

“Whatever. Maybe he’ll listen to me anyway. I mean, I’d be embarrassed if I had to get someone I didn’t know that well to talk me out behind a locked door, dunno about you guys. But as for the stalling, this is why I insisted we take our practice sessions more seriously. How many covers of Seven Nation Army can we subject an audience to?”

Senketsu cleared his throat. Every head in the room turned to look at him.

“I mean, we do have our secret weapon-”

Almost immediately, Ryuko and Tsumugu flinched.

“No.” Tsumugu said firmly. “We’re *not* doing that. No offense, Mako.”

Mako blinked. Confusion was plain as day on her face.“What are we talking about?”

Senketsu planted his hands firmly on her shoulders. “I’m talking about you.”

“Me? What’d I do?”

“You’re gonna hold the crowd off for a little bit. Ryuko has to go talk some sense into that fucking airhead if we get to the end of our set without him showing up.” Tsumugu did not mince words. “Seriously, though.”

“Okay,” Mako spoke at last “but you’d better hurry. I can only do so many covers before I have to break out Master of Puppets-”

“Please don’t.” Ryuko and Tsumugu said in unison.

There was no need to tell her which bathroom he’d barricaded himself in, for it was immediately obvious by the four grim faces around it. They stepped aside as Satsuki approached and rapped smartly on the bathroom door.

“Uzu.”

There was a weak moaning noise behind the door in response.

“Are you alright?”

He didn’t reply the second time. She sighed and leaned against the wood, straining to try and peek through the crack between the frame and the door.

“No use,” Ira rumbled. “We can’t see anything.”

“Maybe he’s having a particularly bad case of the runs?” Shiro suggested.

Houka snickered. She ignored him and squinted through the tiny gap. “Can you speak?”

Silence. Satsuki knocked louder.

“If you don’t say something coherent, I’m going to call an ambulance and have the door taken off its hinges. Can you hear me?”

There was silence, then a faint noise that could have been anything.

“Uzu?”

“I said, I’m fine.” His voice was strained, but weak. “I’ll be out soon, I just need a minute.”

“Why did you lock the doors?”

“... wanted some privacy.”

“Are you intoxicated?”

“No… listen, Sats, I’m fine, I just- I need a little bit of time. I swear, I’ll be fine in a minute, I just- I gotta collect myself.”

“That sounds like a personal problem,” Houka muttered. “Does he need some Tums? Pepto bismol?”

“You’re our bassist. Your job is to play the bass. If you’re in no shape to do that, then why am I sticking my neck out for you? There’s only so much water I can take on before the higher ups start getting upset. If you can’t perform, we have to refund tickets. This is not the time to fall apart on me."

The words rolled off her tongue sharper than intended.

“I know. I know, I know, really-”

“Then why are you holding us up? I have no interest in liabilities. Get it together.”

From the winces on the faces around her, her words cut deep. There was a long pause before she caught him sighing.

“I know. I just need a moment, okay?”

“At least unlock the door.”

“I will.”

“Do you need a doctor or something?”

“No-"

“Are you high?”

“No…”

“Are you lying to me?”

Silence. Without meaning to, her upper lip curled in disgust. She didn’t have time for this nonsense.

“...no-”

“Pathetic.”

More understandably, he didn’t respond this time. Nonon shifted uncomfortably behind her.

“Get it together, Sanageyama.”

“...nut up, huh?”

He sounded a little dejected.

“Your words, not mine. Now, unlock the door.”

“Do you promise not to come in?”

“I promise. But you can’t hold us up like this.”

They all waited for the telltale click before speaking again.

“We’ll be waiting. Hurry up.” She turned on her heel to leave without waiting for a response. “Make sure he pulls it together, and soon.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they echoed in unison.

The crowd didn’t even try to hide their disappointment when she stepped forward to the mic, tiny ukulele in hand. Ryuko looked on warily as Mako ignored the booing.

“I’m the drummer for Freshbloods, Mako Mankanshoku-” Feedback screeched out of the speakers. She tapped the mic twice to clear it and leaned back in. “I’m Mako Mankanshoku, and I’m gonna be performing while Akechi Incident gears up. Any requests?”

A loud voice called out from the audience. “Show us your tits!”

To her credit, she didn’t even blink at the heckler.

“Let’s start with a classic,” Mako chirped. “Who here likes the White Stripes?”

She’d had enough of this. Tsumugu and Senketsu raised their eyebrows at her, but neither of them tried to stop her as she slipped out back, traversing the maze of roadies towards the escalating voices she’d grown to recognize. Satsuki looked a bit stunned to see her.

“Matoi?”

“Where’s the kid?”

“Locked in a bathroom, at a moment. He asked to be left alone.”

“Right,” Ryuko said. “I’m going to go harass him.”

She tried to step past, but something stopped her. Satsuki held onto her upper arm, face unreadable.

“And why do you think he’ll listen to you, and not us?”

Satsuki’s voice held not a trace of concern. In fact, it was completely neutral, and Ryuko scrunched up her nose at the sound.

“I don’t.”

“Then?”

“Just a hunch.” She tugged her arm out of Satsuki’s grasp and cleared her throat. “There’s more than one way to look at a problem like this.”

“Do as you wish, I suppose.” Satsuki’s voice held the barest edge of something Ryuko couldn’t identify. “But we’ll have you on the sidelines in ten minutes, in case you’re not able to persuade him. Can you play the bass?"

“Yeah.”

“Then we’ll be just fine, with or without him. I wish you luck, though.”

She didn’t bother answering her. The bathroom door didn’t stand out in any way, but she rapped her knuckles against it anyway, loud enough to echo inside.

“Are you still in there?”

He waited for them to leave before he finally exhaled, a shaky, desperate release followed by a gulping of air that couldn’t fill his lungs properly. Sweaty, trembling fingers fumbled in his jacket for relief. An orange prescription bottle proved to be a struggle (damn childproof caps), but quick-release pills didn’t taste so bitter when they dissolved on his tongue and went down his throat, even when washed down with metallic water.

Those would be a while, though.

Clothes were constricting but the alternative was worse, and at least they provided some much needed protection from whatever it was that caused his throat to clog shut. Much like a child hiding from monsters under their blankets, he was the proverbial ostrich sticking his head in the sand. And after all, it wasn’t like getting naked had ever really helped him much. Nausea congealed in his gut, a sludge that threatened to crawl up his esophagus, acid and bile burning a path through his chest, but he grit his teeth.

Oh, get ahold of yourself, Sanageyama.

Sweat dripped down his face and pooled in his collarbones, breath shallow and scalding his throat. Beads of salt and water rolled down his back, shirt sticking to him like film from tape

and suffocating, why was his throat closing up why was his heart pounding why were his hands shaking-

god, how long did alprazolam take to work, again? Too long.

Knuckles shone white, bone pressing through thin skin as he gripped the sides of the sink. The mirror showed him, haggard and thin, jaw sharp enough to cut diamond, cheekbones poking out of his face. Satsuki's words bounced in his skull like a bullet ricocheting off a cement wall.

"Liability, huh."

His grip slid from the clamminess of his hands, but it didn't stop him from clutching onto the porcelain like it was a lifeline. A knock rang at the door.

Pathetic.

Not that she was wrong, of course, but the words burned worse in his stomach than cheap gin. God, now he was thinking of gin. What he'd do for a fifth right about now-

"Hey, Sanageyama."

The voice echoed off the tiled walls, and the glass was cold where his sweaty skin stuck to it as he stared off at the wall. In the relative silence, the only thing that could be heard was the dripping of the leaky faucet into the bowl below, and the ragged breathing of the boy with his face pressed against the mirror.

"Can I come in?"

Why was it so hard to *talk*? "Yeah."

The hinges squealed like a dying animal as she stepped in, and he didn't dare look up, lest he meet her gaze in the reflection. Something akin to concern crossed Ryuko's face as she entered the periphery of his vision, hand extended nervously, the way one might approach a scared animal. Maybe that was generous. Playing the innocence card wasn't a luxury someone like him got to have. Rabid might have described him better.

"Yo, are you okay?"

He didn't respond. Something hot and unpleasantly wet rolled down the side of his face, and a mix of disgust and worry clouded her eyes.

"Are you on something?"

Uzu shook his head in response.

"Are you lying to me?" It was incredible how much she resembled Satsuki sometimes, even if her clothes were nothing like anything she'd ever be caught dead in.

“No.” His voice cracked unpleasantly in return, and he tried to smile, facial muscles struggling against the weight on his chest. The increasing panic in Ryuko’s eyes told him it probably looked more like a grimace than a grin. “Just a bit nervous, that’s all.”

An eyebrow cocked in skepticism, but she didn’t counter his claim. “Right.”

“Look, I’ll be fine in a minute, really, trust me, it’s just-”

“Does this always happen before a show?”

She knew.

“No. I’m usually fine, it’s just, well- look, sometimes I just get a bit, y’know-”

“Rapid heartbeat? Sweat? Sudden sense of catastrophic dread? Tight chest? Hyperventilation?”

“Well-”

“Sound familiar?”

“I could just be having a bad trip, for all you know. What if I lied?”

“You’re too coherent. And besides, you’re shaking like a leaf.”

Again, he didn’t speak. She looked at him for a long moment before exhaling deeply.

“How long has this been going on?”

“None of your business, Matoi.”

“Is so. You’re holding us up.”

“Listen.” He tried to keep his voice from shaking too badly. “You go out there and finish your set. I’ll be perfectly fine.”

“We’re three songs away from the end of Mako’s entire music library and you’re in no good shape to do anything. We need you.”

“I’ll be fine in a minute.”

“That’s all the time you’re getting.”

The dripping of the faucet was the only sound between them in the bathroom. Ryuko groaned and ran a hand through her hair, clearly impatient.

“Does this have anything to do with that Vanity Fair article?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really like reading my own stuff… shit just stresses me out. I play the bass, I do my job, I pass out and wake up with people whose names I don’t remember. That’s

what I do." Uzu shook his head roughly. "That's all that's expected of me. But it's alright. It's alright."

Ryuko squinted in his direction suspiciously. "You willing to talk about this later?"

" 's stupid."

"I owe you some whiskey anyway."

"Listen," he said, voice starting to tremble. "Will you leave me alone if I say yes?"

"Drinks?"

"Yeah, why not, whenever we're not as busy." Moisture beaded on his forehead with effort as he forced his voice to stay even. "I'll be out soon, Freud."

"Freud was a hack."

"It's a saying, Jung."

"If you're sure, then."

There was definite hesitation in her voice, but Ryuko was the pragmatic sort, and he heard the door creak open behind him. Numbers added rapidly in his head: one, two, three, fifteen, twenty-seven, eighty-four, a hundred sixty-three, four hundred forty-nine. His eyesight blurred in the mirror as his pulse slowed, a sense of calm passed over him with every breath he took. Joints loosened, muscles untensed. The beating in his chest slowed, and he let his face lean against the mirror, breathing heavily.

He didn't know how long it'd been before he was able to pull himself together and make his way towards the door.

The halls were devoid of any sense of human life besides the rumbling noise of a bass turned up high enough to shake the walls below the stage. He made his way up towards the dressing room, stumbling occasionally, a hand tracing the cracks in the paint to try and ground himself. The bumps under his fingertips felt like Ariadne's string, until a familiar voice broke through his reverie.

"...even listening to me? Uzu?"

Hands grabbed ahold of his shoulders and shook, ignoring the way his head lolled on his shoulders limply.

"They're on their fourth ukulele cover. Uzu. Uzu?"

"I don't think he's gonna answer you anytime soon, Shiro."

Someone shorter than Houka shoved him aside and planted herself squarely in front of him. It took him longer than it should have to recognize Matoi glaring directly at him.

“Sanageyama.”

“...yeah?”

“Your flask of Jack! Your vibrator! Your fear of heights! Your Nikon lens! Your mom and dad! Your disco stick! Your soundtrack to Karate Kid,”

He tried not to look too obviously stoned. Something in her expression told him he wasn’t doing a very good job.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

She waved a hand in front of his face, and there was a moment of recognition that sparked in her eyes when his pupils struggled to follow the pendulum movement.

“Your… scissor blade? Your rivalry, dictatorship? Uh-”

“Fuck me backward with a chainsaw.”

“That sounds… painful.”

“What’s *with* you?” Ryuko hissed. Two hands took firm grip on his collar and shook him, none too gently. “Are you drunk? You’re even more out of it than you were before.”

It took him too long to answer, eyes less focused than they should have been. “Not exactly.”

“There’s only so many songs Mako knows how to play on the ukulele before she has to start playing everything she picked up from Tsumugu, and she’s floundering out there.” Senketsu pointed out. “Let’s hurry up before then, okay?”

“How bad?”

“Metallica, Uzu. *So* much Metallica.” Ryuko ran a hand through her hair and sighed deeply. “Can you play?”

“Yeah. I think so, at least.”

Maybe his response was a little delayed, but there wasn’t like they had much of a choice in the matter. Ryuko looked at the others and then nodded, cupping her hands around her mouth.

“Mako, they’re ready!”

The relief on her face was palpable. She strummed the tiny instrument in her face with all her energy and leaned into the mic to shout off key.

“Your ice cream truck! Your missing wife! Your will to live! Your urge to cry! Remember we’re all gonna diiiIIIIIIIIIIE-”

“Cheerful stuff,” Houka muttered. “What’s with the Amanda Palmer, anyway?”

“You can nitpick our music taste when you keep your own band running smoothly and stop having to rely on us,” Ryuko sniped back. “I’ll be on the sidelines in case this one-” she punctuated her words with a jerk of her thumb in his direction “-can’t perform.”

“Believe me,” Uzu muttered, “If being under the influence kept me from performing, I’d be a much happier person.”

“I don’t like you enough to put up with your innuendo and side comments. Believe me when I say I don’t care about your whiskeydick. Just don’t fuck up, alright?”

“Too late.”

She ignored him in lieu for hefting a case over her shoulder. “Best of luck out there. You’ll need it.”

Nobody could contradict her as she walked away.

It wasn’t until they were two thirds of the way through their set that it occurred to her that something was wildly wrong. The strain of her violin strings reverberated through the hall, and Uzu swayed at his mic, words starting to slur ever so slightly.

“Y’know, I know there’s been an elephant in the room, lately.”

The crowd bubbled. Satsuki raised an eyebrow, and then exchanged looks with Nonon. She shrugged in response, eyes tailing the boy who walked across the stage, mic in hand.

“I mean, I’ve heard the rumors.” He swayed back and forth for a moment before throwing an arm around Ira’s neck. The larger man stiffened. “Like, everyone’s always accusing me of fuckin’... messing around with certain band members and shit, and I just wanna clear that up! I love everyone in Akechi Incident equally!” He beamed at Ira, arm smacking against his chest with every word. “Yo, Ira, tell them how much I love everyone.”

Ira looked straight into the sea of cameras and cellphones held up to record the entire incident and sighed.

“It’s true,” he deadpanned. “I mean, that’s not what I’d call it, but-”

Uzu took Ira’s face very fondly in both hands, and Nonon immediately knew exactly what was going to happen before it did.

“Just watch and see.”

Ira’s eyebrows skyrocketed towards his hairline as Uzu kissed him full on the mouth, to the raucous cheering of the crowd. There was no protest from him, but the flush on his face was

significantly more pronounced when he pulled away, and a nervous hand went to his face to wipe spit trails from his lips.

“That’s my best bud, Ira, y’all know him,” Uzu continued, walking across the stage with the flair only entertainers possessed. “But why are we gonna stop there? Do you guys know our manager? Hey, Iori, come out here!”

From off the side of the stage, Shiro looked like a deer caught in the headlights, but he didn’t protest as Uzu dragged him out by the arm. Houka’s amusement was impossible to miss.

“I love this guy,” he continued, shaking him vigorously. “Shiro is responsible for keeping us all together, and for that-”

If Houka was upset at the sight of their bassist kissing Shiro on both cheeks and mouth, he managed to not show it, instead grinning when Uzu pulled away and leaned towards him.

“Y’all know Houka. I’ll skip the introductions.”

His lips looked very soft when they molded to the dog’s, still smirking wildly. The crowd hooted when Uzu tried to pull away, only for Houka to catch his bottom lip with his teeth and lean back in, tongues pressed to the inside of each other’s mouths.

Gross. They always were showy fucks, anyway.

“Everyone’s favorite tiny little lady-”

Why was he moving towards her? Why was he reaching out for her? Why-

Eventually, someone would tell her that bullet time was a myth.

They were wrong. That didn’t account for the way that time simply stopped working. She felt his hands on her shoulders before her eyes understood why his face was getting closer. There was the familiar wet sound of a mouth opening, but everything was buzzing static, the crowds were miles away. Nothing made sense. She smelled aftershave before she realized she was stretching into his grasp, but it wasn’t until she felt lips brush past hers that her brain remembered how think, lungs remembered how to function, and she inhaled sharply.

He stopped, bottom lip touching hers with less pressure than a butterfly would place on a leaf. A single instant stretched into eternity. Was she high? She had to be high, there was no other explanation for this-

His face dropped lower, under her jaw. Something very soft and very deft pressed against the skin of her throat, and she shuddered involuntarily, heat pooling behind her belly button when his mouth opened where her neck met her shoulder. Lips dragged up towards her face again, and if he noticed her goosebumps, noticed how her thin shirt betrayed her refusal to wear a bra, then that’d explain why he smirked against her when he leaned in again.

She opened up to press her mouth against his, but calloused thumbs crossed themselves neatly over her lips. Her entire head tilted back as he pressed his face against hers, and the

roar of the crowd sounded like an ocean far away, even when he pulled away and beamed at her. Her mouth was dry.

To her horror, she wasn't.

And it was so typical of him to simply walk away as if nothing had happened, as if the touch of his hands didn't burn like a brand on flesh, as if the ghost of his breath on her throat weren't still there, making it hard to breathe and impossible to swallow. He stopped just short of Satsuki and dipped his head, hand outstretched. She smiled as she took it.

"And of course, our leader."

He wouldn't do it. She knew he wouldn't. Satsuki wouldn't allow it. Kisses were for cameras, written into scripts at the end of their music videos. Satsuki didn't kiss people. Every kiss she'd ever given had been wrung out of her like a sponge. Even she could count them in her head, six years later, like tally marks on the cell walls of a prisoner.

Still, her eyes focused on his face when he bent towards her. Lips brushed demurely against the back of her hand, and Nonon let out a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. Of course. He wouldn't go that far.

Nothing could have prepared her what happened next.

"Oi, Satsuki." He stuck his tongue out at her, just as she'd seen him do jokingly a thousand times over. The crowd laughed as he pressed his forehead to hers, grinning. "You're an incredible kisser, you know tha-"

More than anyone, if at all possible, Uzu looked stunned when her tongue slid across his instead of pulling away, and their mouths fitted together.

(Click.)

Two pieces fitting together in what was only the most natural of ways, the echo of hundreds of cameras raised over heads, a sea of shiny glass and metal smartphones recording them. In that moment, time stopped functioning completely. Nonon knew that was what was happening, in the way that quadratic equations made sense in theory, and dissolved into incomprehensible strings of numbers and letters on paper. Where usually her brain would resort to music to help her understand, there was a cacophonic crashing noise, akin to a busful of cymbals running into a brick wall. But the letters formed words, and almost against her will, sentences. Where Satsuki's hair slid over her shoulders as their weight shifted forward, etymology sprouted instead.

'**Monkey** - サル (saru)

mon·key (ˈməNGkē/), noun.’

(Her jaw moved in tandem against his. His face was all but entirely obscured by hers.)

‘a small to medium-sized primate that typically has a long tail, most kinds of which live in trees in tropical countries.’

(Hands slid down to his waist, up to his face, fingers pushing strands of hair out of his eyes. One hand held him, almost delicately, as they leaned back.)

‘**Monkey** - サル (saru)

mon·key (ˈməNGkē/), verb.’

(She could see the shape of their tongues pressed against their cheeks.)

‘to behave in a silly or playful way.’

(When she pulled away, the entire room a screaming mass of humanity and flashing cameras, a long, unbroken strand of saliva connected their mouths.)

(Click.)

(Click.)

(Click.)

“Nonon?”

(The strand of spit stretched out like the moment, pulling them all into eternity.)

“Nonon. Are you okay?”

(He was wiping his mouth with his sleeve, and it came back to fall at his hips, red.)

(Click.)

(Click.)

(Click.)

He was saying something in her direction, and the words half registered in the way worms burrowed in the dirt, trying to get through the haze surrounding her skull.

‘synonyms: to tamper with, to meddle in, to fiddle around with, tinker with, play with, mess with.’

“Can you pass me my guitar? We’re doing an acoustic cover of Why’d You Only Call Me When You’re High…”

She nodded mutely. The nondescript wooden instrument didn’t look particularly strange or threatening, but its weight in her hands felt odd.

“Thanks, Nonon.”

Hypertime was still in place. She could see every single detail, hear everything going on, thousands of heartbeats humming too quickly. Satsuki’s pulse beat visibly against her skin, still breathlessly laughing at her own sense of humor (kissing him, how ridiculous). The two of them had sheepish grins, like there was an inside joke she’d managed to miss, a misplaced memo (now we’re all going to kiss, and it’s going to be funny!) she hadn’t gotten.

The room smelled like sweat and weed and cheap beer and there was a smear of Satsuki’s lipstick on his jaw. The cheering was a dull roar in her ears. His hands on her face stayed behind like the ghost of his touch. The lights were suddenly too hot, the guitar slack in her grasp.

The lipstick was red, and Nonon was dizzy, and she tried, she really tried to say something about it, point it out to him. Hey, you got a little something, you should really wipe that off.

‘a person (especially a child) who causes trouble in a playful way.’

It wasn’t until the wood fractured against his temple that she realized she’d swung instead. He spluttered, stumbling backwards as the remains of the guitar collapsed onto the stage.

There was a very sudden hush that overtook the room as the splinters fell from where they were lodged in his forehead. He raised his face to look at her, a little stunned. As she watched, a trickle of something dark spilled down past his eyebrow and down along the side of his face. Then another. Hesitantly, he reached up to pull a small chunk of wood still stuck in the skin of his forehead, and suddenly, the trickle turned into a small stream. Uzu looked extremely underwhelmed, gingerly probing the wound, only for his fingers to come back red.

“Oh my god…”

She wasn’t sure if they were her words, or someone else’s, but he looked a little confused and dazed when they made eye contact. Blood dripped down his jaw, out his nose, over his cheeks and mouth as it spilled onto the front of his shirt.

“Ow.”

Hands grabbed roughly at her arm, and it wasn’t until the rest of the guitar fell onto the floor that she realised she was still holding the neck with a death grip.

“Nonon, what the *fuck*,” Shiro snapped, shaking her none too gently. “What the actual fuck-shit, *shit*, he’s bleeding. Snap out of it! Nonon? *Nonon*!”

“It was an accident,” she said woodenly.

“Nonon.”

“I didn’t think I could actually break it, holy shit-”

“It’s fine!” Uzu staggered back up to the mic, grinning so widely his eyes squinted shut. “I’m okay!”

“Sanageyama, come here,” Shiro barked. “We’re taking you to the emergency room.”

“Iori, I’m fine, I’m fine! I told her to do it!”

Shiro shot an incredulous look at her before looking back at him. “You did what?”

“Guys, I’m okay, I just- she’s got a hell of a swing. I think you used the wrong guitar, Jakuzure!” He laughed a bit, and stumbled forward. “I’m a little… dizzy. But that’s my fault, it was my idea… right, Nonon?”

Shock froze her to the spot. All she could do was nod. She could feel the disbelief radiating from everyone on stage, stares boring into her back.

“... right.”

“You’re lying,” Houka muttered. She didn’t bother turning around to confirm or deny a statement they all knew was true. “Nonon…"

As they all stared at her, Uzu went for the spare acoustic guitar and hefted it into place, ignoring the increasingly heavy bleeding.

“Uzu, put the guitar down, and please lay down, we’ll continue without you. We’ll take you to the hospital.”

“No. Anyway,” Uzu continued, stubbornly, “Here’s W-”

He didn’t finish the sentence before he stumbled heavily, and Satsuki and Houka grabbed ahold of either arm before he went down.

“Shiro, take him to the hospital,” Satsuki muttered urgently. “While you’re at it, get me another bassist.”

“We have Matoi in the sidelines-”

“Good. Get her out here, now.”

Nobody looked at her as Satsuki reassured the crowd, or as the guitar was taken offstage, bloody handprints on the neck and body.

After that, the night was a blur of noise and people and muffled arguments about gifts and insurance policies. Someone pushed a drink into her hands, wrapped her in something warm, and she found herself sitting back in the quiet darkness of her hotel room at the end of the day, the room next to hers silent except for the occasional sound of Shiro rummaging for things to take to the hospital.

She took a sip and regretted it, the bitter taste of cheap beer flooding her mouth. Wincing, she almost didn’t hear the muffled steps approaching her, or the door closing behind them.

“Nonon.”

The voice caught her off guard. Nonon looked up to find the last person she wanted to see, standing above her.

“Do you mind if I sit down?”

“Nah.” Fingers curled into the thin aluminum, PBR can crushing under pressure. “Take a seat.”

It was funny how Satsuki was still so formal, even years later, always asking for things she knew others would take for granted. Part of her was tempted to appreciate it. The other part of her, knew, deep down, why. Pride had kept her from ever accepting a formal apology, or at least that’s what Nonon had always told herself, and instead Satsuki said ‘I’m sorry’ in every action she took around her, closure in a thousand miniscule gestures. It was both endlessly infuriating and almost charming, in a way. However, it wasn’t like her to beat around the bush though, hard-learned delicacy or not, and she got right to it.

“I’m-”

“Stop it.” Nonon raised a palm to cut her off. “You don’t owe me any apologies. I know that.”

“... I was going to say I’m concerned about you, but I suppose I’m sorry as well.”

She scoffed. “Worried about me? I’m not the one with a cut open face. If anything, I should be apologizing for almost cutting our set short. And, uh, smashing a guitar into our bassist’s face.”

“Fair enough.”

There it wasn’t- a demand for an explanation. After all, she of all people would know…

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not particularly.” She tugged at the hem of her skirt, staring at her knees in a desperate attempt to avoid eye contact. “It was a stupid impulse.”

“It’s okay to be upset, Nonon.”

“No, it’s not.” She curled up, face pressed into her knees. “It’s petty, and embarrassing, and stupid, and I hate it. I hate this.”

“Emotions aren’t rational things. Love doesn’t need to make sense.”

There was no way she could respond to that, not with the L word being invoked. Acid bubbled in her stomach, bile and beer and a sick sense of nausea crawling up her esophagus. Six years of pining, and all it took was one kiss to unravel her completely in public. Six years since she’d held her last, six years since…

The mouthprints on her neck seemed to throb in response, as if to further twist the knife in the wound.

Perhaps Satsuki understood that Nonon wasn’t going to be talking much, because there was a gentle hand on her shoulder as she stood.

“You’re obviously stressed out. Please sleep for as long as you can, tonight, alright?”

All she could do was nod in response. Satsuki gave her a look that might have been a comforting smile on someone else's face, but just felt like guilt bubbling alongside the trashy beer in her stomach. Bad drink choices aside, she'd leave the regret and alcohol combination to the people who did it best. She didn't dare look at her as she made for the door.

But where the door would have closed behind her, there was a pause.

"Matoi?"

"Oh, Kiryuin. Shit. Sorry to interrupt you so late at night."

"It's fine, I was just leaving, anyway." Satsuki didn't move. "Are you here to see Nonon?"

"Yeah. By the way, I really appreciate the headphones and all, but you don't have to…"

"Think of it as a favor. I have trouble sleeping myself at times. If it'll help you rest, then it'll boost productivity."

"Right." Ryuko's voice sounded like the equivalent of a raised eyebrow, even though she couldn't see her expression. "Guess it'd make sense for you to be such a capitalist bougie fuck, wouldn't it? No offense, but, seriously."

"None taken. Accusations of that sort rank low on the scale of grievances I've had today."

"No kidding." There was the sound of someone's weight shifting from one foot to another and Ryuko cleared her throat. "Sorry for catching you on the way out, but is she here?"

This time, Nonon caught Satsuki's eye as she looked over, questioningly.

"I'm here," she managed, standing with more difficulty than she would have liked to admit. "I'll be out in a minute."

The platforms she'd struggled in all day still chafed when she put them on, but the four inches of height they provided her was invaluable. Like *hell* blisters would make her flinch. Not even the cheap beer would make her wobble. She'd embarrassed herself enough today. Ryuko raised an eyebrow at her choice in footwear, but declined to mention anything.

"I'll see you later, Nonon," Satsuki said.

"Ditto."

This time, she could see Ryuko raise an eyebrow, but her mouth stayed mercifully shut. For once, she stayed quiet until they were opening her room, and safely out of earshot before speaking.

"What the hell was that all about?"

"Do you mean in general, or?"

“Both, I guess.” Ryuko gestured for her to sit as she slouched back in a cheap seat. Nonon took a long look at the piles of clothing everywhere before clearing a spot on the bed. Her feet dangled uselessly off the ground. “Are you okay? Is *anyone* in your band okay?”

“We’ve got some history.”

“Psh, yeah, no kidding.” She fumbled in her pockets for a cigarette and lit it with what Nonon recognized as a Bic lighter with Akechi Incident’s logo on the side. “Between the prescription drugs and whatever the fuck happened on stage, I’d think so.”

“Yeah. He’s kinda… he’s just a fucking idiot, honestly, I don’t know why we keep him around. Honestly, I think we’d just ditch him if he weren’t our other singer.”

Ryuko paused with her cigarette halfway to her mouth. “Didn’t seem that way to me.”

“Huh?”

“If your bassist is sick, you get another. If someone’s a liability, you drop them. How long have y’all been a band?”

“About six years. What are you getting at?”

Ryuko looked at Nonon as if she were missing something.

“You guys care about him.”

“... what?”

“You guys are friends,” Ryuko said, confusion tinting her voice. “That’s what friends do, they care about each other.”

“That’s rich. We’re co-workers at best.”

“That’s bullshit. Y’know, it’s okay to like people who’re stupid, right? Or are you gonna tell me the same shit Satsuki told me? The whole ‘strictly professional’ crap she gave me in regards to the hotel thing-”

“They’re not a couple,” Nonon said immediately.

“...are you sure…?”

“I’m positive,” she said, though doubt coiled in her stomach as she spoke. “They can’t be dating.”

“And how the hell do you know that?”

“I just do, alright? I know them well enough to- look, you’re the one accusing me of being friends-”

“What, did you date him or something?”

“Not… him.”

There was exactly nine seconds of perfect silence before Ryuko clapped her hand to her mouth.

“Oh my god.”

“Yeah.”

“God, that’s one hell of a dating history,” she murmured. “How long?”

“We lasted a year, maybe a bit more, maybe a bit less. It was a long time ago.” Nonon didn’t move her eyes from her feet, still swinging over the side of the bed. “It was an amicable split. We’re still best friends, and-”

“You fucked Satsuki Kiryuin?”

Someone needed to nominate her for sainthood for not immediately throwing her shoe at her.

“That’s… one way of putting it, I guess.”

“So, like… what happened?” The cigarette in her hand was dropping ash onto her lap, but she didn’t seem to care. “I mean, if you don’t mind telling me.”

“It’s alright, it’s just…” Nonon’s voice trailed off. “She figured some stuff out about herself while we were dating.”

“Ah.”

More silence. Nonon was getting kind of sick of these. “So I know for a fact that there’s nothing between them.”

“What about you, though?”

“Huh?”

“You don’t just break a guitar over someone’s head if you’re over your ex-girlfriend, y’know.”

“He kissed me-”

“No, he didn’t.” This time, she put the cigarette out before the burning filter could catch her fingers. As she reached for another one, she continued. “What did you think I did while I waited in the wings, jack my dick? I can pay attention. There’s a pretty obvious distinction between a stage kiss and an actual smooch.”

Yet another goddamn awkward pause. “Close enough.”

“No one likes a jealous ex, dude.” *Click*, the sound of the lighter, a tiny flame in the dim light of the room.

“I’m not *jealous*, I have no reason to be jealous-”

“Yeah, because halfway killing a dude for making out with your former girlfriend totally isn’t jealousy.”

“It’s not like that!”

“So your ex dipped your bassist.” Ryuko shrugged deeper into her sweatshirt. “I mean, I’m sorry you had to see them eat each other’s faces and all, but like, jeez.”

“You don’t understand,” said Nonon in a strained voice. “It’s different.”

“Understand what? He didn’t even kiss you.” Ryuko gestured with her cigarette in one hand, and she wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Okay, I guess going for your neck is grounds for an asskicking, but like, dude. Overkill much?”

“Who cares about that, are you smoking Newports? Ew.”

Recognition gleamed in Ryuko’s eyes, but mercifully, this time, she took the hint.

“Just finishing off this box, I’m gonna be smoking American Spirits after this. I’m making big money now.” She hesitated, understanding crossing her face. “Oh, sorry. You don’t dig the smell of smoke, right?”

“Uh-”

“S’no biggie.” Before Nonon could answer her, Ryuko stubbed the cigarette out on the cheap wooden armrest. “Mako doesn’t like the smell of smoke either.”

“Isn’t that a fire hazard?” she protested weakly, staring at the melting varnish and burnt circle. “At the very least, the hotel management isn’t gonna like that…”

“This place is a shithole. The only thing the cigarette burns are doing at this point are adding to the ambience.” Ryuko tucked the cigarette back into the pack, eyeing the room. “Seriously, though, this room’s a dump. What the hell did you do to piss off your boss?”

“I wasn’t there. I have no idea.”

“Kiryuin’d better take care of this. I signed on this tour to move on up from skeevy hotels and bedbugs, y’know.”

“I’m sure Satsuki will take care of everything.” Nonon stared at her knees as she spoke. “For whatever reason, I think her mother’s in a better mood now.”

Ryuko leaned back in her seat, the wood protesting under her weight. “Weird.”

“You don’t know the half of it. Hey, you feeling up for messing around?” She faltered under the raised eyebrow she got in return. “It was worth a shot.”

“I’m beat, Jakuzure. If Tsumugu and Mako don’t come in to check up on me, I’ll just check out the water pressure in the bathroom. It’s the only place I’d feel safe having sex in this trash heap, anyway.”

“Gross.”

“You’re the one willing to fuck me on these mattresses. Gross is just the tip of the iceberg. And you should at least have the decency to check up on the kid.” Ryuko narrowed her eyes at her expression. “What?”

“I don’t really… *dig* hospitals.”

“Dude, you probably concussed the sorry fuck. The least you can do is apologize for that much.”

“Sats’ll make me apologize later, anyway.”

“What is she, your mom or your ex-girlfriend?”

“Shut it.”

“Look, you do what you want, but it’s late, and I didn’t get much sleep last night. Go or don’t, but get outta my room.”

“Visiting hours are over, probably…”

Ryuko stared at Nonon with an incredibly blank expression. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but you’re *kiiiiiiiiiiiind* of a celebrity."

“Do you think some forty year old nurse is going to care about the violinist of some teenybopper band? Satsuki could get in. I don’t have a chance. I’ll go in the morning.”

“That’s harsh. I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Listen. Once this story spreads, I’m going to be blocking fans sending me death threats, or worse, en masse, on pretty much all my social media. I’m already scared to look at my mentions.”

Ryuko grimaced. “Reminds me of the time I picked a fight with Hakodate. That got me and the band blacklisted from half of the west coast.”

“At least it got you Twitter verified.”

“True.” Ryuko didn’t blink as she watched Nonon stand. “You take care of yourself now, alright? Stay away from anyone who looks like they care too much about the kind of music they listen to, because fangirls are scary when they’re pissed.”

“I appreciate your concern. It’s touching.”

“Love ya too.” She blew a kiss in her direction. “I’ll talk to you later. Maybe when my wrist isn’t as sore from playing for a couple of hours straight?”

“What do you mean?’

In response, Ryuko lifted her hand up. Two of her fingernails were clipped short, and she crooked them towards her. Nonon groaned.

“You’re disgusting.”

“Talk to you soon.”

The words felt like they echoed in her head as she stepped out onto the curb of the hotel parking lot. In the growing chill of the evening, her fingers fumbled with the metal case. Inside were ten neatly lined up Parliaments, and the slender mother of pearl inlay lighter she’d bought on impulse at the duty free shop.

“I should quit,” she murmured to herself.

Still, the familiar burn in her lungs steeled her for what she knew she had to do.

It was very late when he pulled back into the parking lot, worry creasing his forehead like an accordion. His mother had always chided him (“don’t make that face, Ira, your face will stick like that”) and true to form, he had premature, if faint, wrinkles between his eyebrows. He peered into his rearview mirror to take a look at his hairline. Roots were starting to peek in, black against bleach blonde. How distasteful. He’d have to remember to ask Uzu to help him with those when he was well and on his feet again.

The lobby’s warmth was a comfort after the early morning chill, even if it wasn’t the most pleasant- he side-eyed the concierge filing her nails- but a comfort nonetheless. However, it wasn’t until he got to the hallway where his room was located that he found anything out of the ordinary, a small figure with drool pooling on the collar of her shirt. Reflexively, he squinted, just to make sure, but yes, that was Mankanshoku, obviously asleep in front of her room.

Nobody had ever taught him the etiquette behind waking sleeping people in the middle of a seedy hotel hallway. His experiences with waking people up usually didn’t extend far past yelling, shaking, ice water and the occasional pillow to the face, none of which were going to be useful to him at the moment. Did he touch her shoulder? Would it scare her to be woken up by such a big guy? Maybe it’d be wise to make himself smaller.

Ira crouched by Mako, hand hovering nervously by her shoulder. Was it okay to tap her awake? A large snot bubble formed as she breathed deeply, and he hesitated.

Then he remembered the general populace of a hotel such as the one they currently found themselves in, and decided that if she was locked out of her room, perhaps it was best she be awake.

“Hey,” he whispered, gently tapping her shoulder. “Mankanshoku. Hey.”

His voice was not one suited for whispering, as he realized almost immediately. Her head rolled to the side, but she didn’t stir.

Damn it. He tapped a little harder, and the sleeve of her shirt slid down her shoulder.

Ira bit back the urge to groan as he tried pinching the fabric falling down her arm, eyes averted. As soon as he’d gotten it back to where it was, however, the other sleeve slid down the other shoulder. This time, his noise of frustration was audible. He’d only just reached out when a voice interrupted him.

“Maybe try calling me by my given name, instead.”

Mako’s eyes didn’t move, but her mouth curled into a smile. Her serenity contrasted so violently with the way he leapt back, startled, that he couldn’t blame her for laughing.

“Mankanshoku?”

“Did I fall asleep again?” She lifted her head, blinking sleep out of her eyes, and gave him a weary smile. “Tsumugu should be back from drinking soon. He promised me.”

“Are you locked out?”

“Yeah. Miss Satsuki let Ryuko borrow a pair of fancy noise cancelling headphones, and I think she must’ve fallen asleep with them on, ‘cause she didn’t respond. I know she was sleepy, though- she got up real early and spent all day making sure Senketsu was alright.”

“And you lost your key card?”

“Nah, but mine won’t work. Ryuko’s was the only one that could always get the door to open. Eventually.”

“The reader must be busted up, somehow,” he muttered. “Do you want me to break the door down?”

“It’s okay. Senketsu said he was gonna sort it out with the concierge.” Mako’s eyelids drooped, head bobbing over her chest. “It’s… it’s alright. Thanks, though.”

“I just wanted to make sure you were alright. And, uh, thank you for your help picking out a gift for Uzu.”

“Did he like the bunny?”

Ira shrugged. “I couldn’t tell what he was saying because of the pain meds, but I did get a thumbs up from him. I think it was a thumbs up, anyway.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. You’re both very welcome.”

“You saved the day today, Mankan-”

“Mako. My name is Mako. Call me Mako.”

He stuttered. She looked up at him expectantly.

“Thank you… Mako. You saved the day. Thank you for stalling.”

“It’s no biggie.” She stretched out, tiny besides him. “Just doin’ my job.”

Something dangerously close to fondness filled his chest. “No, really. You did.”

“Well, anyone can do basic first aid, and the ukulele isn’t that hard to learn. I’ll teach you a few chords, if you want. It’s fun.”

“Thank you.” A muscle in his face twitched from the effort of not smiling. “I’m sure Uzu’s grateful too.”

“Learning new stuff is cool. The only thing I really learned today is that you were serious when you said you weren’t dating Uzu.”

“Y- wait, *what*?”

She turned to look at him, face completely stoic. “I thought you guys were secret lovers. Maybe in an open relationship? Some steamy, passionate gay romance that you were hiding from the paparazzi, like the kind you find in pulp novels.”

“I… pulp novels?”

“But don’t worry! I wouldn’t have sold the story, even if it had been true. I don’t think I’d’ve gotten a lotta money for it, anyway, and I think you guys are pretty cool.”

“Wha- I- thank you? I think?”

“Y’welcome.” She yawned painfully, jaw cracking from the effort. “But if it counts for anything, I’m kinda glad you’re not actually, like, forbidden lovers. You’re too nice for him.”

Without meaning to, her eyes fluttered, and he noticed how long her eyelashes were when they brushed her cheek. A patch of dried spit flaked on her chin, an ode to her exhaustion. Something in his chest fluttered painfully, and before he realized what he was doing, he was reaching for her face, handkerchief in hand-

“Thank you for keeping her company.”

Ira’s head turned around so fast he feared whiplash for a moment, only to find Senketsu standing there, holding up a thin sheet of plastic.

“It’s just me. I apologize if I startled you.”

It took him a moment to recognize the plastic as a key card. “It’s alright. Just caught me off guard.”

“Did you get the key?” Mako’s voice slurred from exhaustion. “I’d like to sleep in a bed, now.”

“Don’t worry.” The android knelt besides her, face remarkably gentle for a creature made of plastic and metal. “Soon.”

By the time he’d scooped her up in his arms, she was asleep, secure in the grasp of the arms of her friend, and already starting to drool on his collar. Senketsu did not bat an eye, shifting her weight to let him open the door.

“I can get that-”

The door buzzed, and swung open. Senketsu shrugged and turned to face him.

“Thank you for everything, Mr. Gamagoori.”

“Ira’s fine,” he parrotted, and coughed when he realized what he’d done. “I mean, call me Ira.”

He didn’t like the way Senketsu smirked knowingly at him, but it was too late to care much anymore.

Sterility always set Nonon’s teeth on edge, and the faint, permeating smell of bleach and antiseptic sunk into her tastebuds in a way she knew she’d be shaking off for days. The echo of her footsteps preceded her in every hall she turned down, eyes scanning the numbers hung by the doors. It shouldn’t have been a difficult task to find him, but the hospital was bigger than she’d realized, and it had taken an awkward detour into the maternity ward to realize how deceptively difficult this maze was to navigate. She’d blame it on the early morning hours, the way she’d blame her headache on the bright sunlight streaming in the windows and her poor sleep the night before.

Still, perhaps her shame made her more patient than she would have been otherwise. The door made the barest clicking noise when she turned the handle.

There was an IV, but the only bag attached to it was clear and nonthreatening. The white bandage cut into his hair in a way that didn’t flatter his already sloppy haircut, but he turned around anyway and grinned. Not surprisingly, the gesture was significantly less creepy without the rivulets of blood running down his face.

“What’s with the long face?”

“Fuck off,” she shot back.

Nice, Jakuzure. Nice.

His grin faded momentarily. Knee-jerk reaction or not, maybe that was a bit much

“You look awful,” she added, less harshly. “Don’t grin at me like that.”

Perhaps it was the lack of venom in her words that caught him off guard, because he hesitated before grinning in full again.

“It’s nice to see you too, Nonon.”

The door shut behind her as she pulled up the seat next to the bed. “How’re things going?”

“Y’know, same old, same old. Guitar to the face, a lecture about not using Xanax without prescription, confisticating my weed- ‘parently, I can’t smoke in a hospital at all, so they took my cigs too.”

“Sounds rough.”

“You know, it’s okay. I probably deserved that.”

“No, you didn’t. Not entirely.”

“Well, if not for that, then I’m sure I’ve accumulated enough bad karma over the years to deserve a acoustic guitar to the cranium.”

She didn’t laugh. Uzu sighed and ran a hand through his hair, wincing when he accidentally brushed past the gauze.

“Alright, though, are you okay?”

Nonon started in surprise.

“Why’re you asking me? You’re the one with the face that got cut open. You’re hooked up to an IV, for fuck’s sake.”

“It’s just saline, I was dehydrated when I came in. You’re usually so coolheaded. It’s not like you to do something like that.” He angled his hips up to allow him to swing around, hair sliding into his eyes as he flipped to face her. “Is there something wrong? Anything I can help you with?”

Guilt pooled in the pit of her stomach as she shook her head.

“It’s nothing serious. I just… overreacted to having my face touched. It reminds me of...”

“Say no more.” His palms flew up, open in a gesture of peace. "I shouldn’t have tried to kiss you.” He frowned. “I shouldn’t have kissed anyone.”

“Y-yeah.”

If he noticed her stutter, he didn't comment on it, choosing to grin at her instead.

"Anyway, they're gonna let me go soon. Do you want to treat me to dinner as an apology?"

Relief flooded her stomach. "Oh, come on. It couldn't have been that bad if you're feeling well enough to joke about it."

"Not true. They gave me stitches, and a lecture on drug usage, but I figure the stitches are newer. More of a novelty."

"How many stitches?"

"Five. It cut to the bone."

"*Jeez*."

"Gotta hand it to you, Jakuzure, you've got one hell of a swing. Ever consider trying out for the major leagues?"

"I prefer the weight of a violin in my hand than an aluminum bat, thank you very much." She rolled her eyes, but if she was being honest with herself, it was more out of familiarity than any sense of annoyance. "I uh, brought you your jacket back. You left it with me before you left Seattle and…"

"Sweet. Thanks, dude."

When his hand extended to take the jacket from her, she was grateful he didn't bother asking any questions, like why it smelled like her shampoo, or why the pockets were empty.

"It's getting cold. Thought it might go some way towards saying sorry."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but you wanna apologize? Seriously. Buy me a couple of Doritos Locos Tacos and we're good."

"You never fail to disgust me with your shitty taste in everything."

"Wow." He put a hand dramatically to his forehead, wincing when he smacked against his stitches. "If you keep hitting on me like this, I'm gonna think you like me or something like that. Guitar to the face, repeatedly calling me scum- makes a boy swoon."

The sarcasm was thick in his voice, and she felt somewhat less guilty about elbowing him in the ribs.

"Cute. You have no sense of romance, Monkey."

"So are you gonna take me to Taco Bell or what?"

She squinted at him suspiciously. "You're letting me off easy. You got ulterior motives or something?"

“Nah. I’ve got enough bad karma to deserve an entire orchestral strings section to the face, Jakuzure. And, uh, I know how you feel about her.” He tried to smile and failed, skin tugging unpleasantly under the bandage. “Don’t think anyone could blame you, though. She’s one of a kind.”

Something squirmed unpleasantly in her stomach. “Yeah.”

“I know the others must be telling you it’s been awhile, and, well, they’re not wrong. But we can’t help our feelings, y’know?”

“Don’t spare me. You said it yourself, they’re not wrong.” Nonon looked up to see a hand hesitantly hovering by her arm.

Uzu drew back.

“Hm?”

“I figured it was best not to… touch you, y’know.”

Her eyes traced the patterns on the ceiling instead of looking at him. “As long as you don’t try and kiss me again.”

“Right.” He awkwardly patted her elbow. “Sorry about her.”

“Don’t be. You had nothing to do with it.” She settled back in the shitty seat, suddenly sullen. “Are they letting you go today?”

“Well, they already held me overnight, just to make sure there weren’t any complications. With the concussion scare, mostly, ‘cause I’ve had a few minor ones before, but also with other stuff.” He winced. “Apparently, I’m malnourished, but free to go. We can check out now, if you want.”

“Eat more often, dude.”

“Like I said, Doritos Locos Tacos for lunch.” His hand reached for the surgical tape keeping the tubes in his arm secure.

Without meaning to, her hand snatched his before he could touch the needle.

“Nonon?”

“Don’t be an idiot. Get a nurse to take that shit out.” The words came out gruffer than intended. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

Uzu blinked slowly. “Are you actually… *worried* about me?”

“You’re my friend, right? I can’t help but do it. I put you here, anyway.”

“Friend, huh? That’s not the f word you usually use to describe me.”

She shrugged joylessly. “Are you complaining? You’re not getting Taco Bell from me if you’re gonna rip some fucking tubes out of your arm like a zombie apocalypse survivor.”

“Jeez, it’s not like it’s life support or anything. I’m not gonna die so easy.”

“Where’s the call button?”

“Alright, alright, I’ll get a nurse. But really, I’ve had a lot worse than a few needles. Hell, I’ve had a lot worse than a guitar to the face.” He reached for the string hanging above the bed and tugged. “You happy now? I swear, honestly, I’m fine.”

“There’s no need for the bravado, y’know.”

Uzu bolted upright. “I’m serious!”

“You don’t have to fake anything. You totally almost passed out when I hit you.”

“Are you, like, proud of that?”

“You’re the one who complimented my swing. Pick a struggle. Should I feel bad or not?”

“I got into a lot of shit when I was younger, so don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

“Whoa, cool it. Who said I was worried?”

“Ice cold.”

Nonon cast a glance around the room. She hadn’t bothered to pay much attention to her surroundings when she’d come in, but lo and behold, the entire place was filled to the brim with flowers, stuffed animals, candy and balloons. There was even a huge box of chocolate on his lap, half eaten and clearly expensive.

It made the handwritten ‘get well’ card stashed in her purse seem a little mediocre.

Uzu caught her gaze and grinned again, reaching behind him for the most egregiously pink fluffy bunny of the bunch. “D’you like them? Ira got me this one. Honestly, I have no idea where I’m gonna put these, though. You want one?”

“They’re cute,” she managed. “Fans?”

“Some of it. Apparently, Shiro’s sorting out the rest and insisting any further gifts be made out to charity or something. There’s only so much candy I can eat.” As he spoke, he popped a piece into his mouth, chewing sloppily. “Seriously, it’s like Willy Wonka up in here.”

“Then share, or something.” The words were out of her mouth before she could think them over, and he blinked in surprise. “You know I like sweets.”

“And I’m the one you accuse of lacking subtlety,” he murmured, but didn’t resist. “I’ve been picking at these for a while. Do want some of those, or should I break out the cherry cordials?”

“Do you have dark chocolate truffles?”

“By the bucketload. Here-” He offered her a piece with the hand that didn’t have a huge needle in it, and she reached up hesitantly to take it. “It’s strawberry creme filled. That’s your favorite, right?”

Her fingers had barely touched his when an unfamiliar voice rang out.

“Mr. Sanageyama?”

Uzu jerked his hand back as if he’d been burned at the unexpected presence of the nurse. The truffle bounced off the edge of the bed and collapsed to the floor, rolling unceremoniously under her seat. Nonon tried to hide her disappointment with a smile.

“Is he alright?”

The nurse raised an eyebrow at her presence. “I thought you were the one that put him here. Yeah, he’s fine.”

“Publicity stunt gone wrong,” Uzu piped up. “And no harm done, long term, anyway. Can we get the needles taken out? We’re leaving, grabbing an early lunch.”

“Stay still, kid. I get you’re excited, but I gotta take the tape off first.”

“It’s fin- *oW*.”

Told you so, Nonon mouthed at him, and got an irritated eye roll for her efforts. She tried not to think of the chocolate under her seat as he slid into his jacket. Sweets could wait. Lunch, according to the rumble from Uzu’s stomach, could not.

Chapter End Notes

My tumblr is satsukichan, feel free to ask me about this or any of my other fic!

[EDIT: DEC 12, 2015: this fic is still happening, don't worry! It's on an unexpected hiatus because of college kicking my ass, but updates are posted regularly on my blog!]
[EDIT #2: APRIL 15, 2016: I'm so sorry I swear on my goldfish's grave I didn't expect to take such a long hiatus BUT this fic is still happening!]

fight for your right

Chapter Summary

You pops caught you smoking and he said, "No way!"
That hypocrite smokes two packs a day
Man, living at home is such a drag
Now your mom threw away your best porno mag

You gotta fight for your right to party

Chapter Notes

This was not meant to take this long, holy shit, but I just got through my first year of college and a *lot* of stuff's been happening! Warnings for (non-explicit) underage sex, explicit underage drug/alcohol use, parental emotional abuse, brief animal cruelty, Hot Topic and ableist/homophobic slurs commonly used by mid 2000s era teenagers.

(Yes, it's *Another* Uzu Chapter.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Uzu didn’t remember how they’d gotten here.

That in itself wasn’t any cause for alarm- he often ended up places without really remembering the sequence of events that had led him there, and concern was something he’d forgotten long ago, and he wasn’t really sure it mattered to him, anyway. Not anymore, at least.

She pressed closer to him, bodies flush against each other. It was impossible to grasp whose face it was he was kissing, and the sound of her breathing was indecipherable from any of the other, many girls he’d done this with. He could do- he *had* done- this blindfolded. Fingers curled under the hem of his shirt, and his mouth trailed past her jaw, down her throat, past collarbones. His reward for divesting her of her bra was a exhale of relief, followed by the sharp intake of breath when he put his tongue to use where she was sensitive. Fingers curled in his hair, needy, demanding.

In any case, it didn’t strike him has particularly out of the ordinary, the way she sighed in satisfaction when he pressed her wrist against the- was it a wall? A bed? The entire situation

was hazy at best, and yet, he knew where the kiss, where to touch, to make her respond. When he peeled her thighs apart, they were wet from what felt like hours of his leg rocking against her.

There was too much familiarity involved here. The beaded sweat behind her knees where he held her was memory, muscle and otherwise, he shouldn't have known how to make her back arch so quickly, gasped out pleas and his name, stuttered out like an offering to a cruel and kind god, and he didn't care, didn't care, didn't care.

"On your back."

It was the first time she'd spoken directly to him the entire time. Her face was still obscured by the hair that fell into her eyes, and the voice was too close to not be able to place, but it was husky with the familiar, post-orgasmic rasp of a screamer. Uzu was also not the type of gentleman to keep a lady waiting, but the way her tongue trailed down his chest made him feel less than, uh, dandy, and, *Jesus* , was that warm.

"You don't need to pretend this is anything but what it is. What you want it to be? I mean. Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck* , okay, you can… s-stop doing that when I'm talking."

The words poured out without his permission. Uzu didn't know where they'd come from. She looked up, mouth wet and eyes dark.

"You want me to stop?"

"... no."

"I didn't think so."

Her head dropped below his navel and the groan he let out, heavy and stuttered out, felt like the first bite of dark chocolate. Rich.

Satisfying.

Her hands rested lightly on the insides of his thighs, and he knew every breath he took resonated in his veins, pulse beating shakily against his skin. Muscles contracted uselessly under her touch, for her one rule for this was clear- no touching. Instead, they heard the soft slide of cotton sheets against themselves as he gripped on tighter, clutching on for dear life, for a weak attempt at coherence, mumbled words and prayers spilling from his lips.

Mouth, cunt, mattress, moans, the dust of drywall and the taste of her lips on his, rhythmic banging as the bed rocked along with their bodies. Why he seemed to think that there was any god that would forgive them, he didn't know. That had to be why he kept begging, voice keening higher and higher and *higher* and-

"God, don't tell me she's your bird? I don't fuck bi guys."

There was no smoke in the world of his dreams, but the acrid smell of cheap cigarettes was certainly not something that worked well with morning wood, and last night's lay looking at him groggily.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Uzu managed. The remnants of sleep lay heavy on his eyelids and tight in his boxers. “And it’s too late for that, anyway.”

“Whoever she is, tell her to fuck off.”

“I *heard* that, you wannabe Rocky,” Ryuko’s voice called through the door. “Sanageyama, tell your twink one-night-stand to evacuate the premises, because I can, and I will, break this fucking door down if you don’t get out here, right now.”

Uzu peered down at his lap. “I’m not exactly… decent right now.”

“And I’m sure that’s *awfully* out of character for you.”

“I’ll be out in a minute,” he managed. The young man lying in bed did, unfortunately, have chiseled abs and tousled blonde hair, but he wasn’t about to give Ryuko the satisfaction of knowing she’d guessed right. He did, however, smirk at his predicament as he looked around for his pants. “Uh, sorry, Brad, you gotta evacuate the premises.”

“My name,” said the Rocky expy, “is Bryan, which I’d have thought you’d remember, the way you kept screaming it last night.”

“Right.” Uzu nodded, one leg in his jeans. “You gotta bounce, though.”

Ryuko was insufferably smug when he opened the door for her and caught sight of Bryan. He glanced down to double check he wasn’t still pitching tents, and found the front of his pants mercifully flat.

“Maybe you are gay after all,” Bryan’s voice dripped with scorn, gaze trailing down his torso. “Don’t call back.”

“Like you need assholes like that to get your dick wet,” Ryuko muttered as he sauntered down the hall, fully within earshot of him. “And put a shirt on, for chrissakes.”

“I appreciate the sudden concern for my sex life, Matoi.”

“It has less to do with your sex life and more to do with a personal slight against my sexuality. You pick him up off Grindr?”

“None of your business,” Uzu said curtly. “Didn’t think you’d be an early riser.”

Ryuko shrugged. “I’m not. But Senketsu needs a tune-up, and the nearest place Tsumugu can pick up the parts *just* so happened to be where his boyfriend is right now.”

“Convenient.”

“Mako wanted to go along, and then your big, er, *friend* decided he was gonna tag along, and I had *that* going on in my hotel room at eight in the morning. Also, it’s almost eleven. So-” Her face twisted in distaste. “Is that fucking *Unif*?”

“You know me. I’ve always been a hellraiser.”

“There’s a difference between being a bratty punk and just a douche!” Ryuko paused to look at him in suspicion. “Why are you smiling? Did I miss something?”

Uzu ignored her and finished shrugging into his shirt. “Let’s roll.”

Part of him scrambled to grasp at the remnants of his dream as he followed her out of the room, but he couldn’t remember anything besides the sweaty grasping of bodies and shoulder-length hair tangling in his hands.

And if he was going to be fully honest with himself, he’d been remembering that kind of stuff for far too long.

Four figures stood in the marble halls of the funerary, easily distinguished from the white walls by the somber color of their dress. Two men, bespectacled, a slender woman with a death grip on her handbag, and a boy, hair stubbornly refusing to stay flat.

The funeral had been a grim affair, as funerals were wont to be. Uzu had resisted tugging at his collar throughout the whole thing, if only for the sake of his father, face grey in stark contrast to the late summer sky. His cheek still stung with the slap he’d received only this morning, for sneaking a smoke while everyone was busy readying themselves for the day. Still, even he knew to keep his mouth shut as his parents returned with the urn in hand. Two parents gone in the course of only a few months…

The Sanageyama patriarch cleared his throat brusquely.

“With your grandmother gone, the konnyaku business is left in its entirety to me, as the new head of the Sanageyama household,” he said curtly. “This means we’ll be traveling much more frequently, as you can imagine.”

Uzu kept his gaze pointed at the floor, mouth shut tightly for once. This time, it was his brother that spoke.

“What does that mean for Uzu?”

His forehead wrinkled further. “Your mother and I have been thinking this over since my mother fell ill. Tsubo, you have university to worry about, and I hate to impose the responsibility of taking care of your younger brother, but we won’t be able to supervise him constantly with our traveling. Since the alternative is to take him with us-”

“You want me to move in with Tsubo," Uzu blurted.

Tsubo blinked.

It was uncanny how much he’d grown to resemble their father. The two were the exact same height, but one had a face lined with repressed grief and accumulated stress, and the other

was smooth cheeked and youthful. Tsubo's eyes were serious, but he was soft where his father was severe, slim where his father was stockier. It was obvious at first glance that he'd had a sheltered life, where years of work had taken their toll on his father.

"Well, it's either that, or we send you to boarding school." Sanageyama Sr. looked contemplatively at the urn of his mother's ashes. "Your mother's mother is too ill to look after you-"

"I'll live with Tsubo."

"What." Tsubo said.

"I-I'll be good, I swear," Uzu stammered, hands shaking with excitement. "I'll keep my room neat, and I'll keep my curfew-"

"You want him to move into the apartment with me," Tsubo continued, voice completely flat. "You want me to take care of him."

"Tsubo, I turn fourteen in October," Uzu pleaded. "I can cook for myself. I can get around the city myself. I'll remember to charge my phone-"

"Father, are you *sure* -"

If he'd noticed his son's pleading tone, Sanageyama Sr. did an excellent job of ignoring it.

"Boarding school tuition is college money, and Columbia isn't cheap, even with your scholarships. Your freshman year went very smoothly, if I remember, and your mother and I trust you to be a… good influence on your younger brother."

"Mother-"

Their mother sighed deeply. "We've decided this is the best option for him right now, and we trust that you can handle it."

Eyes gleaming, Uzu clutched at his brother's immaculately pressed suit jacket. "This is gonna be *awesome*- "

"Uzu, you'd do well to remember we're still in a funeral home," his father snapped. "Keep your voice down."

It was almost certainly in bad taste to have to resist grinning from ear to ear with the smell of death around them, but something glowed in his chest, warm, hopeful.

Parking lots were not particularly interesting places to spend extensive amounts of time, something that had once been patently untrue. There was not much to do in the suburbs, for

example, but fool around in the backseats of cars and loiter on the curb, paper bags concealing illicitly obtained 40s, and the 24-hour 7/11 parking lot had been the perfect place to do that.

However, he was twenty-three now, not fourteen, and sitting shotgun to an increasingly frustrated woman who wasn't interested in the contents of his boxers.

"I thought you said your dealer was gonna be like, ten minutes late." Ryuko looked like she was about to punch a hole through his windshield. "I thought I'd be smoking a fat blunt right now. We could be hotboxing this thing."

"He's… uh, lost, maybe?"

"We've been here for an hour and a half!" She slammed her fist on the steering wheel, irritation clear in every line of her face. "It's almost two!"

As if in response to her outburst, Ryuko's stomach growled.

"He's gotta show up eventually," Uzu said lamely. "And this is a rental. No hotboxing."

"Since when do *you* care?"

"Since I had to have our producer bail me out of credit card debt and get my license back after the last time I- never mind."

The amount of concern he'd seen on Ryuko's face today was a very explicit reminder that he should keep his mouth shut or full more often.

"Is that why you let me drive here?"

"Do you wanna eat?"

"Huh? Don't answer a question with a question, Sanag-"

He jerked his chin at the window. Ryuko's eyes followed until they stopped at the tiny restaurant he was gesturing towards, and then her brows almost disappeared into her bangs. A bright neon sign with three burnt out letters proclaimed it to be the "home of best burritos north of the border!".

"This place looks like they give out free tequila shots with purchase of a three dollar watered down beer. This place looks like Chipotle fucked Taco Bell in a dumpster. Burritos aren't even real Mexican food."

"Are you complaining? It'll be my treat. An apology for making you wait with me for so long."

"Yeah, thanks, food poisoning."

"It's either that, or gas station sushi, and I know for a fact you didn't get the continental breakfast this morning."

Ryuko was already unbuckling her seatbelt. “Don’t drink. I wanna try the margaritas.”

Unsurprisingly, the place was nearly deserted when they stepped past the beaded curtain, save for a pair of old men with leathery skin nursing Coronas in a booth, but Uzu was privately impressed. Clean, if shabby and worn. The lone waitress working the shift was the brightest thing there, almost out of place with youth.

“Hello, welcome to the Taco Temple. I’ll be your hostess today.” She spoke with a slight drawl to her words, stretching them out like the gum she snapped in her mouth. “Please, take a seat.”

They both looked at the faded sign by the door that clearly stated **WAIT TO BE SEATED**. “Uh, where-”

“Anywhere you want.” Their server gestured around the small room with a sense of defeat. “Lunch rush is over.”

Uzu had to resist the urge to ask if the two men day drinking across the room counted as a lunch rush, but cleared his throat instead and followed Ryuko into another booth, vinyl eager to stick to her thighs. The formica was chipped and bleached by the sun, as were the tattered menus the waitress dropped unceremoniously on their table.

“I’m getting the burrito combo with the margarita-Corona duo,” Ryuko declared immediately. “If I’m gonna die of food poisoning because your dealer can’t keep appointments, I’m gonna do it drunk.”

“I thought you were more of the taco type, given Nonon’s anatomy.”

“That wasn’t even *clever* , you fucking ass.”

Their server snapped her gum again, less patiently this time. “Y’all ready to order or what?”

When he was fourteen and they called his boyish energy ‘a probable case of undiagnosed attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder’ and he had the whole city of New York sprawled out in front of him, Uzu liked to play the bass.

The events that had led to a teenage foray into the greatest city in the world had involved many shouting matches, dozens of exhausted phone calls, a hurried audition, and some wheedling from Tsubo as he desperately tried to get out of caretaking his brother.

“We’re paying for an apartment and we expect you to help your brother out here, and that’s final.”

Tsubo wilted under the ice in his father’s tone. Uzu tried not to show any visible signs of excitement.

“You’ll be a good influence on him,” his mother said curtly. “I’m sure you boys can handle yourselves just fine.”

And of course, Uzu was a champion at finding good outside influences. It took him just over two weeks of school to show up home plastered at 4 AM on a Thursday morning, a bleary-eyed Tsubo glaring at him over a cup of coffee and a table covered in paper.

“What’s the point of having a phone if you don’t answer it?” he asked, voice shaking with obvious exhaustion. “Mom and dad said-”

“They ain’t here.”

“You *reek* of fireball.”

“Live a little.”

“You!” Tsubo threw his hands up, his stage whisper full of barely concealed frustration. “You! Are a high school freshman! I’m the college student here! You have school in the morning, you aren’t- where did you get- *why*- ”

“‘m going to bed.”

He waited for the telltale signs of his brother settling in for the night before he risked sneaking into the bathroom to vomit.

By the end of September, he’d figured out the best way to sneak whiskey into class (plastic apple juice bottle), how to pass off his stoned deliberation of words as thoughtfulness (silence and calculated pauses), found the stairwell corner where the cameras couldn’t see him bum cigarettes off the upperclassmen, and the service exit with the broken alarm for when he didn’t feel like showing up to his algebra 2 class. An art school education indeed, interspersed with his first detention of the year (for calling a teacher ‘uglier than a dog’s asshole’), and the blisters that faded into calluses from endless scales- half in class, half in his living room as Tsubo played them out on the piano that had been their parents’ graduation gift to the valedictorian (of course).

“The neighbors are complaining,” he spoke into the relative quiet of the living room. Uzu looked up from his screen. “We need to soundproof your room.”

“They should be grateful for the free concert.”

“Maybe if you could stay on key. Don’t you have homework to do?”

Onscreen, Kratos missed the last button in a QTE and fell to his death. Uzu sighed and dropped the controller into his lap. “Probably.”

“Do you do anything but play shitty video games and emo music?”

“Do you know how much like mom you sound right now?” Uzu paused. “Swear jar.”

“Now who sounds like mom?” Tsubo fished his wallet out of his back pocket anyway. “We’ll be buying you new strings for months at this rate.”

(Uzu neglected to mention that his brother’s occasional slips in language was the glut of his weed money.)

One Columbus day weekend and multiple trips to and from Home Depot later, his room looked like a padded asylum cell. They laid sheets of homasote over the insulating foam for an extra layer of soundproofing and to mimic having a wall again, and took turns testing the whole thing by yelling through the door. To his credit, Tsubo did a good job of pretending he hadn’t let him have the master bedroom, and was a good sport when it came to helping him tack up all his posters again. The complaints from the neighbors dropped off steeply, even if the whole thing was a double edged sword- soundproofing worked both ways, as he learned quickly.

His bedroom door swung open without warning, not giving him time to scramble away from Vincent Patel fully. The two boys froze in place. There was no point in trying to disguise the flush spread across their faces, or the sloppy wet bite marks on their necks, or the fact that Uzu’s hand was still very much down his pants.

“I-” Tsubo looked at him blankly. “I’m sorry for… interrupting you.”

“Please get out,” Uzu said, very quietly. Vincent was still struggling to control his breathing underneath him, his restrained pants puffing warm breath under his jaw.

Tsubo nodded mutely.

One reassuring conversation with a borderline hysterical teenage boy and a bowl of the good shit later, he’d built up the chemical courage to knock on his brother’s door.

“Tsubo.”

“Come in.”

His brother was sitting quietly at his desk, staring at the work on the table with the expression of someone who had laid out their assignments and had no intention of doing any of them.

“Hey.”

“Were you going to tell me?”

Silence. Uzu swallowed. “I didn’t know how.”

“You know I wouldn’t tell mom or dad. *Especially* not dad.”

“I know. That… that wasn’t why I didn’t say anything. I’m sorry you had to find out like that.”

“Don’t- don’t worry. I’m not mad and I don’t wanna grill you or anything. I just… I’m sorry for barging in. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“That’s why you knock, dude.”

Tsubo sighed and pushed away from his desk in resignation. “Come here.”

He obeyed. His brother sat on the edge of his immaculately kept bed and patted the spot next to him. He’d barely sat next to him before his arm wrapped tight around his neck in an embrace.

“I know it isn’t, like, cool or anything to say this, but… I love you a lot.”

“You’re choking me-” Uzu gasped. “And I like girls too, y’know.”

Tsubo let go immediately. “Sorry.”

They sat in silence again.

“Make sure to wear condoms, er, either way.”

“Fuck you.”

“Swear jar.”

They’d ordered forty minutes ago. In the span of forty minutes, their food had arrived once, been sent back, been brought back out, been halfway devoured, and washed down with *maaaaaybe* one too many drinks. Jesus. They weren’t skimping on the tequila, even if they were skimping on the price.

To follow up, Sanageyama had vanished with their server, whose name, Ryuko had found out, was Lou-Ann. Not halfway through the meal, she had been treated to a wonderful exchange of increasingly less subtle innuendo between Lou-Ann, (who had finally recognized them after a smoke and Twitter break) and Uzu, (who was, to his credit, abstaining from drinking). About ten minutes ago, they’d both excused themselves, and now she looked like she was day drinking on her own.

(Not that she hadn’t been before, but now she looked doubly pathetic and had a reason to do so. Fuck Lou-Ann, fuck Uzu, and fuck Uzu for fucking Lou-Ann.)

As if to shake her from her self-pitying reverie, an obnoxious muffled buzzing noise rang out. It took her a few seconds to figure out where the noise was coming from, through her own personal buzz. Uzu’s jacket had been thrown onto his seat when he’d excused himself, and now she answered his cellphone with the same callousness he’d shown her by leaving her to get day drunk on her lonesome.

“Hello?”

“Uh, is this Junior? I have your delivery.”

Ryuko immediately shot up in her seat to look through the Windex streaked glass windows. A gangly youth was sitting in a pickup truck out front, phone pressed to his ear.

“The silver Ranger?”

“Yeah. Y’know, I thought you’d be a dude-”

“I’ll be right out.” She hit the end call button before he had a chance to question her further.

Now, where the hell was his wallet… Ryuko shoved her hand deeper into his pockets until her fingers felt worn leather. Pulling it free, she noticed the stamp of a designer whose name she couldn’t pronounce- clearly a gift. Sanageyama didn’t strike her as the type to splurge on designer Italian leather wallets.

The guy in the truck was smoking a Marlboro when she walked up. His eyes traced her form, none too subtly, only snapping up to meet her gaze when she cleared her throat.

“You’re late.”

“Yeah, my bad.” The dealer scratched the back of his neck. “Anyway, three for the ounce, as agreed, but I actually just sold the last of the blow to the guy before you so I’m out, sorry.”

Her face must have contorted because he backpedaled immediately.

“I can rec you someone-”

“Two fifty for the ounce.”

“This is good shit,” the dealer complained. “I’m already underselling myself here.”

“Two seventy.”

“Two eighty, take it or leave it.”

“Deal.”

Ryuko opened Uzu’s wallet and peeled two hundreds and four twenties from a roll. The guy counted them rapidly before handing over a paper bag.

“Pleasure doin’ business. Have fun.”

“I will,” Ryuko muttered under her breath as the truck blew up clouds of dust in her face. “I definitely will.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

Jeremiah turned to look at him as if he were stupid. “Since when does this shit scare you?”

“Dude, I live with my brother. If I get arrested-”

“You just wash the x off your hands! Don’t be such a fucking freshman about this.” Yennifer looked incredibly irritated with Uzu. “Just go and ask for a Corona or something. We’ll be outside, okay?”

“R-right.”

Yennifer rolled her eyes. Even though she was a freshman like him, the only other one in the gang, her actions were significantly smoother, more casual, as if she’d been doing this for years. Maybe she had. He thought of the way she didn’t wince when they passed around the bottle of Jim Beam, even when the others gagged at the taste of the bourbon, crouched in the corner of the stairwell where the school cameras couldn’t catch them. It didn’t matter, though, when they were all loitering out on the steps outside, smoking Newports and waiting for the second band to come on.

The soap in the bathroom was thin and runny, and he tried his best to not think of what could be in there. He scratched into his skin until the ink ran down his hand. Where there had been black sharpie marking him as a fourteen year old, there was now a red, irritated x trying to imply he was seven years older and perfectly within his rights to buy the two dollar beers they slid across the wooden counter.

He cracked his open on his way out of the building, slipping through sweaty punks shooting the shit about the newest band on the scene, and there they were, slouching and bumming cigarettes off of irritated twenty-somethings. They were trying their hardest to look hard and menacing, however, with the tiny glass pipe (four dollars on Saint Marks’, haggled down, cheap and milky and painted a swirling blue-green) passed from kid to kid. Sabrina wrinkled her nose at the burning embers left in the bowl and lit a joint of her own instead, and when he reached them and she offered him what was left, he didn’t even hesitate. It was better shit than what they were used to, and he held the last hit in until his eyes watered before exhaling.

“Got your beer?” she asked. Sabrina was short for a seventeen year old, but one of the nicer of the upperclassmen that he hung with. Uzu privately wondered if she was willing to put up with a babyfaced freshman because she could so easily be mistaken for one, but chose not to question it. Her boyfriend was a botany major at BMCC, and also the reason their supply never ran dry.

He nodded. Yennifer quietly handed over a flask of something that burned his throat as it went down (“It’s Scotch,” Max explained. “My parents don’t lock the liquor cabinet.”) and he took a sip of his beer to follow it. It still tasted like piss, but it was better than being sober, he guessed.

“Second band’s coming up soon,” Yennifer muttered. She wobbled in her platforms a little, but managed to make her way down the stairs okay anyway. “See y’all inside.”

“I’ll come with,” Alex managed, and stumbled down the steps after her, kicking aside the empty Heineken bottles in his haste to throw an arm around her waist, pressing her close to him. Uzu noticed she didn’t resist the movement, let her head rest on his shoulders, long sleek ponytail falling down her back. A lump formed in his throat.

“Hey.”

Sabrina leaned in close to whisper in his ear, the smell of alcohol apparent. Without meaning to, he inhaled sharply, caught off guard by the suddenness of her breath by his ear.

“ *Dude* .”

“Sorry.” She slinked forward, smiling widely. “Are you jealous of him?”

“It’s not him I’m jealous of. Well, I mean, it’s not that Yennifer isn’t pretty, but…”

“I’ll keep you company, if that’s what you want,” she murmured. “But if it’s any reassurance, I’ve heard he swings both ways- oh, you’re going back in?”

Uzu stood faster than he meant to, and the THC and alcohol made their presence known in the way his head swam, a rush of blood and endorphins and hormones swirling in his veins. “Yeah. Wish me luck.”

The inside of the venue was smoky and reeked of body odor and hops, but he pressed on, determined to find them. Cymbals crashed with purpose, leather and denim clad bodies rocking out, surrounded by extension chords and screechy amps and profanity scrawled on the walls. Sensory-wise, the place thudded with purpose, if purpose here was to get as fucked up on the music that seemed to fill every single cranny of the room, burning hot with no space for oxygen. Uzu could barely breathe, squeezing between college students and local youth shouting along the lyrics to a song he’d never heard before. All he wanted was to find them, but something pulsed behind his eyes, blinding him in the electric hell of flashing lights (for emphasis!)

Lo and behold, there they were, sweating and swaying to the sound of the alt noise punk band crooning into the mic on stage, hand tight around her waist, lips pressed against her neck. She giggled. The action rippled like water.

“What’re we smoking?”

Alex’s eyes lingered on Yennifer before they slid over to him, lazy and fluid. “I don’t smoke my own shit, it’s shit. You’d have to ask Sabrina’s boyfriend, he’s the botany major. It’s a sativa, I know that much. To be fair, I think there might be some ground up peyote in the mix this time? Dunno, dude. I asked for something trippier. You feelin’ it?”

Then the guitar on stage screeched out, and Alex couldn’t even pretend to care about his stupid question, not with the music spiking electric in their blood. Uzu couldn’t blame him, not with the entire crowd pulsing to the sound of the cymbal crashing resonating in every single cell in his body. Who was he to protest, to resist?

Someone ground against him, someone grabbed his wrists and pulled him close. The entire world was an orgy of sex and sweat and perfume and cheap beer, stale cigarettes on the breath of everyone who kissed him, screaming and jumping and pressing together to the beat, the beat, the beat, drunk on liquor and love and flesh and he couldn't focus on anything but his heart stuttering along to the music, song after song after song.

One, two, three breaks to skip outside, smoke another bummed cigarette, a few hits off an offered joint, bitter swallows of cough syrupy drinks and more piss flavored beer. Yennifer, for all her posturing, got looser and looser for every grimacing gulp from the emptying flask. The others pretended the bracing taste was nothing, even though their movements were wobbling too. Alex groaned as his kinda-sorta-girlfriend slumped against him, hampering his movements as he tried to dance.

"Yenny. Baby."

"Mmmn." Her hair stuck to her forehead, sweaty and green from the light and the liquor. "I wanna… sit down…"

He kissed her face, once, twice, three times. Uzu's fists felt clammy. "You wanna go to the bathroom, baby?"

"I… don't…" She gasped sharply and dry heaved, clearing a space around them immediately. Alex swore under his breath.

"She's too drunk to fuck," he muttered. "God, why is she so sloppy?"

Uzu's mouth felt bone dry. Eyes traced Alex's profile, sweat dripping down his temples, and felt his jeans tighten.

"Does this…" he huffed for breath. "Does this happen often?"

"Sometimes, I swear she does it on purpose." Alex rubbed the back of his head and sighed. "Now I gotta get her home. Can't have any fun like this."

Something about the exchange sat funny with him, but he couldn't pinpoint what.

"You sound, uh, worried about her," Uzu said, instead.

"Yeah, I mean, we ain't official or exclusive or anything like that, but she's cute, y'know? And she can vacuum like nobody else."

Yennifer's head lolled back, throat exposed like a vampire novel damsel in distress, and she moaned quietly.

"I think Sabrina's leaving, get Yennifer into the cab with her. I gotta take a leak." Alex shoved her dead weight towards him, and he instinctively caught her. Yennifer's form was limp and malleable in his arms, and almost slipped out of his grasp. He hadn't expected her to be so heavy.

Yennifer was a tiny slip of a girl, but he was an even tinier slip of a boy, and he looked around helplessly. It was up to him to drag her over to the entrance, and with the chemicals chugging through his bloodstream, that was easier said than done. By the time he'd managed to get her to Sabrina, waiting impatiently in front of the venue, one of her shoes was scuffed beyond repair.

"Leaving so early?"

"I gotta work in the morning," Sabrina shrugged. "Not all of us get to stay out till dawn. But I'm switching shifts next week, so I should be free then."

"Right."

"See you next weekend," she said, hefting the drunk girl into the backseat none too carefully. "You gonna fuck him instead? Use a condom. No fun being a slut if you catch something, and Alex gets around."

"I'm not-"

"Uh-huh." Sabrina winked at him. "Good luck."

The car turned the first corner, so the taillights no longer lit up the dark street. There he was, drunk, stoned, and standing on a cold street in the middle of Brooklyn, and determined to leave tonight significantly less virginal.

It was getting later in the night, and the last band playing was significantly drunker than the others. Alex was leaning against the bathroom wall when he found him, one beer held to his mouth, the other outstretched in his direction.

"Thanks, dude." He offered the can. "Wanna drink?"

"Don't sweat it." Uzu took the proffered beer and drained the rest of it, liquid courage surging in his bloodstream to dangerous degrees. "Sorry you didn't get laid tonight."

"Eh, the night's still young, and the crowd's looking good tonight." His eyes trailed down his front deliberately, and Uzu's throat felt like it would close up. "And I like those who like to do me a favor."

"I'm always willing to lend a hand."

"Yeah. You seem the… helpful type,"

God, he was smirking in his direction. Was he hard? Oh god, he was probably hard, could he tell, was he looking-

Before he could stutter out something witty, there was a hand cupping him and a tongue making its way past his lips.

His mouth was wetter than he'd been expecting, and the smell of him made him feel like he was drowning- the scent of sweat off Old Spice, and Heineken, and nails yanking his hair as

he pulled him against him, almost bruising him with the intensity of their kiss. Uzu grabbed a fistful of shirt and tugged down, greedy, so that when he gasped for breath for an instant it felt like too much distance between them.

“ *Fuck* .”

Hands scrabbled for the doorknob, and then the stench of the toilet was added to the onslaught on his senses, filtered through the sweet haze of alcohol and the fact that Alex was most definitely gripping him through his levis. Nails clawed through his shirt, and somewhere, faintly, he realized he didn’t know where his jacket was, and didn’t care. Warmth pooled behind his bellybutton as his mouth dropped lower, planting a sloppy mark on the edge of his jaw where his face met his throat.

“A *h-* ”

If his gasping was amusing to Alex, he didn’t let on, choosing to press his teeth into his jugular so hard he thought he’d pass out. His vision swam, knees jellied and weak as they pressed together, braced between the dirty wall and the sink. The whole room was spinning, Alex wouldn’t stop moving his hand, his tongue, his mouth-

Something inside him jerked violently, and he ground into his palm, grunting a wet and low groan as he shuddered, mind blanking for an instant before he dropped back down to Earth, every nerve on his body on fire. It took a few moments before he could focus again, face red with the blood that was beginning to crawl back upwards. Alex had an expression on his face he couldn’t quite read through the swirl of pheromones and buzzing neurotransmitters in his brain.

“Do me.”

“Huh?”

He gestured towards the wet spot on the front of Uzu’s jeans. “Tit for tat.”

And perhaps if he’d been in a more lucid state of mind, he would have considered that maybe, just maybe, this was a bad idea, that hooking up with an upperclassman in the bathroom of a dive bar in the middle of Brooklyn was a bad idea, and could not possibly lead to anything good for him or anyone else around him. But alas, Uzu was not in a more lucid state of mind, and biology was itching to take its natural course.

“I’ll suck your dick,” he blurted out. “I mean, I’m probably not as good as her, but, uh, if you want a… blowjob… I, uh…”

His words trailed off, and heat flooded every single cell in his body. Alex blinked. The tiny bathroom felt incredibly cramped all of the sudden, and he was acutely aware of his hands gripping his hips closer, close enough to feel him through his pants.

“Uzu.”

“Yeah?”

There was a long moment between them, and Uzu couldn't help but note that the fluorescent lighting made his mouth and hair the same shade of red pink. His hand tucked a longer strand of hair behind his ear in a way that could almost be mistaken for fondness, and then, gently, patted his cheek twice.

"You're cute for a freshman," Alex muttered, finally, and guided his hand down towards the fly of his jeans.

In retrospect, he had no idea what he'd expected.

(What, you swallow once and you expect him to sweep you off your feet come Monday?)

He could kick himself, for the way his stomach clenched when Alex walked straight past him and kissed Yennifer full on the mouth, hands sliding down her back to palm her ass in the middle of the damn hallway. Sabrina gave him a knowing smirk as the security guards barked an off-color warning to keep it PG at them, and Yennifer's eyes looked glazed over with the intensity of her morning welcome.

Eh. Heartbreak was heartbreak. It happened to every halfway decent musician, sometimes more than once. He tuned the guitar he was practicing with for a few days, in lieu of his usual bass, and ignored the whispers about the violently purple bruise on his neck. He snapped at the first teacher snide enough to press him on it, and skipped his detention to smoke spliffs on the curb and sell a few juniors a dimebag each.

(And because he was an idiot, and because he never learned, he still answered yes to his texts to meet him in the bathroom the days Yennifer cut class.)

"What were you expecting? He just wants a warm mouth and someone help him deal his weed. You and her are both. Are you even making any money?"

Someone's Street Fighter game was going badly, he thought, from the sound of incessant swearing radiating from the corner, but for now he was lounging in the racecar seat, watching the screen flash neon colors begging for another quarter.

"I don't know."

Sabrina looked catlike in the way she sprawled back in the plastic seat, but he chalked that up to the shrooms they'd choked down on dollar pizza a few hours back. He could feel the entire arcade reverberating to the beat of the DDR music in the background.

"He's like that. Boys are all like that, especially once you give them what they want."

He looked away from the flashing lights threatening to bring on a headache, and observed the stained panels making up the ceiling. "I want him."

“If you want to get your dick wet, there are much less shitty people willing to do that for you.”

“You know any?”

Sabrina seemed like she was about to say something, before closing her mouth shut. “You’ll find someone.”

Yeah, someone. *Someones* . If you knew where to look, there were a great deal of people willing to kiss him so his knees went weak, hands grasping at each other in crowded stalls or even bedrooms, if they had their parent’s work schedules memorized. An entire summer flew by in a blur of weed, kisses and pilfered vodka, interspersed with scabs from falling off his skateboard. He built calluses on his calluses as he played for days on end, forgetting to eat or sleep until Tsubo came in to check he wasn’t dead or dying. He was determined to become the Lord Byron of punk rock, come hell or high water, and he certainly had enough bongs to clean out to meet the requirements of the latter.

Senior and his wife came to visit. Due to the distance between the home he’d grown up in and their schools, it was too much of a hassle to commute or rent out the place, so the brothers would spend their summers in the city as well. Their father cast his gaze upon them, and surveyed them so closely Uzu felt akin to a sample under a slide and less like his son.

“I thought you’d keep his grades from being so pathetic, Tsubo.”

His brother winced. “He works very hard, Father, I promise.”

“What about those disciplinary calls I keep receiving, then?”

“I’ll take them, I don’t want to interrupt your meetings-”

“I’m *paying* for an Ivy League education, and you are going to receive it.” His father’s steely gaze passed over him, contempt barely disguised behind his wire frames. There was a foreignness to the way he looked at him that made him a stranger. Uzu had trouble believing that anyone could have possibly ever held him in diapers, and that he hadn’t simply burst into being, salt and pepper hair and disapproval in his eyes. The man that stood between him had sired him, but the months of distance made it impossible for him to recognize him as anyone he might have ever called dad in earnest. “Perhaps I should have Uzu sent somewhere that will actually straighten him out, so as to not distract you.”

“ *NO* .” Tsubo blurted out, before Uzu could say anything. “I’ll do a better job. I swear. I’ll keep him in check.”

“How’s your GPA right now?”

“I’m maintaining a 4.0.” Tsubo responded. “Sir,” he added hastily.

Their father turned to him.

“And what’s your excuse for not working harder?” Sanageyama Sr. asked coldly. Uzu felt his blood turn to ice in his veins. “A 1.7 is beyond pathetic. If your brother can handle taking

care of you, this apartment, and his studies, then you have no reason to be flagging behind so badly."

Uzu shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. "I'll work harder, sir."

"I understand you're at that school for hippies, but that's more of a reason for concern. I want you to understand if your GPA isn't at least a 2.5 by next semester I'm going to have to look into a school with a stricter sense of discipline." He straightened out his cuffs as he spoke, a sense of disdain for the entire exchange blatant on his face. "You haven't got the brains Tsubo was given, so your only recourse is to work. I won't be so irrational as to expect you to get a perfect score on your SATs like your brother, but if you're going to be like this, go all the way. You chose to play this… bass. Play it to the best of your ability. Don't waste your potential like this."

A lump formed in his throat. This was what his father called mercy.

"I understand, sir."

And god, as if he wasn't playing until his fingers bled, repeating the scales and playing along while Tsubo sat at the piano, sheet music alternating between halfway legible and completely incomprehensible to him. A concert pianist in the making next to a dirty punk with clutching a bass. One, two, was that a G or an A, sharp or flat, over and over until the length of a single note was as familiar to him as his own heartbeat.

"Not as sloppy," his music theory teacher said with mild surprise, come his sophomore year. And at the end of the day, that was all he wanted to do- shock, surprise, impress.

He'd blow them all away.

Ryuko was even stonier with him than he'd expected her to be when he sat back down and continued eating his burrito. Lou-Ann teetered out of the bathroom, flushed and sweaty, to scamper off into the kitchen.

"You good?"

Instead of answering, she took another long sip from her beer can. There were perhaps more empty cans around her than advised for someone sitting in a diner in the middle of the afternoon, but who was he, of all people, to judge?

The tortilla had absorbed more of the bean juice than he was fully comfortable with, but he chewed the soggy mixture anyway. Sex always made him hungry after, anyway.

"You wrapped it, right? No little Texan Sanageyamas running around in nine months?"

Uzu choked on a mouthful of rice and steak. Ryuko was glaring at him from across the table, grip on her Tecate can a little too tight for comfort.

“I’m not an idiot, Matoi.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” she grumbled.

He sighed and glanced around the tiny restaurant. The place was even emptier now, with the old men gone, leaving only dirty plates and crumpled dollar bills in their wake. Another waitress approached the table and silently took their plates, perhaps wisely. If his eyes didn’t deceive him, Ryuko’s left eyebrow was twitching from irritation.

“How many have you had?”

“Not enough.”

His new bookbag was still clean and free of ink stains from exploded Bic pens, and didn’t even smell like vodka yet. That’s how early in the school year it was when his Sidekick buzzed against his leg on the morning J train, and on the screen was only a single message.

me/jason/marion r cutting 2 c a movie

come with

Well, it was only September, and algebra made his head hurt, anyway. Sabrina was significantly more interesting than quadratic equations, at least. And he didn’t question why Jason and Marion chose the furthest corner away from them, not when they were always on top of each other in public anyway. It was too dark to see anything but the screen and the hand that had somehow ended up on his knee. He took a long swig from the Dr Pepper bottle he’d snuck in, and the taste of rum and soda complimented the huge blunt the four of them had split between them before coming in.

“You like action movies?”

“Yeah, I guess.” The hand on his knee was warmer than anything in the world at the moment. “Don’t most people?”

“Mnhm.”

Uzu couldn’t understand why she wasn’t moving her hand, or why his answers seemed to bore her, even though she kept asking.

“Sabrina, are you like, bored or something?”

Instead of responding, her hand slid a few inches higher up his leg and she turned to look him directly in the eye.

“How old are you?”

The simple question seemed infinitely more complicated than a two digit number, but the heavy wool in his mouth lay thick and sticky like the smoke pressing on his brain, muddling his thoughts.

“I’m turning fifteen next week,” he managed finally. A car exploded in the background, and one of the muscular men on screen grunted out a one-liner. “Dunno if I’m gonna do anything for it though.”

“Huh.” Her eyes trailed over his body, sprawled out in the cheap foam seat where he slouched in front of the huge screen. “You’re kinda young to be messing around with the people you hang out with.”

“We have algebra together.”

Sabrina didn’t respond for a moment.

“Hey, Sanageyama, can I ask a question?”

He nodded. She shifted closer, hand on his thigh now, breath tickling his ear.

“... are you a virgin?”

Her hand was warm and the hand rests might have been sticky with soda and other, less pleasant fluids, but they were the only line he had left to reality, nails curling into the cheap seats.

“What are we counting, here? Veronica Mendes and I fooled around, kinda. So did Jason and I. Vincent. Carmen. And there was Alex, too…”

“If you need to ask, you’re a virgin.” Sabrina sounded more amused than she should have, and yet he didn’t protest at the condescending tone she took with him. “What’d Veronica do anyway, suck your dick? That’s really cute, though, that you’re a virgin, ‘n’ all that.”

Perhaps he should have pushed her hands away when they reached for his belt buckle, but the voices on screen were fading out to a high pitched drone, and all he could focus on was the curve of her hips as she leaned closer. “I thought you had a boyfriend.”

She scoffed, and the action made her actions brusquer, so that he rolled his hips into her touch. “Barely. I know he’s cheating on me with some bitch in his chem class. That skank’s an easier lay than Yennifer, and she doesn’t even have half the rack. At this point, I’m just with him for the free weed.”

“Oh.” The word was halfway a sigh.

“And you’re a lot cuter than he is, anyway.” Sabrina leaned her head on his shoulder, fingers tracing words against his skin.

“Am I? I mean, I’m really short, and-”

He stuttered off at the sight of the foil package she pulled from her pocket.

“Well, when you’re not babbling. You talk too much when you’re high.”

“Do I reall-”

Her mouth was warm and he didn’t care that her lipstick was flaking off from how dry her lips were, tongue sticky and sweet and tasting of diet Pepsi, not with her thighs sliding over his to straddle him properly. A thousand thoughts struggled to come to fruition in his head, but they were too viscous to form words, to form anything, anything at all.

“Happy birthday,” she whispered, and he didn’t care to try to think or say words anymore.

“This guy’s really late,” he complained, hoping for a response from the woman sitting across from him. He hadn’t expected her to be this angry at him, and now the awkward atmosphere was starting to dig at him. “There’s only so long we can loiter before it starts feeling rude.”

“Rude? You mean, like, running off to fuck our waitress mid-lunch?”

Ryuko’s voice was clearly trying to stay even and cold, but the effect was lost by the way her words blurred together ever so slightly. Uzu winced.

“Uh. Fair.”

“He showed up while you were gone,” she continued. “Drive us back.”

“Wait, what?”

She stood, wobbling only the tiniest amount as she did. “This place is the Hotel California of restaurants. Let’s blow this popsicle stand. I call shotgun.”

“There’s only two of us- hey! Wait up-”

But she was gone, swishing through the beaded curtains before he could call after her. Uzu groaned and tossed a crisp twenty onto the table before jogging after her.

The music pulsed through the apartment walls so loudly he could feel the thudding in his chest. Not that he cared, per se- it was hard to care with two 40s in his body and the rising of bile in this throat. He pushed through the throngs of people lounging around the bathroom with one hand, the other sweatily gripping onto the crushed remains of his plastic cup.

"'scuze me."

Claire (Wu, not Yang) and Brad were busy under the fluorescent lights, the double Ds that he'd last felt up when they were barely Cs pressed flush against his chest, his knee propped against the wall to keep her thighs spread. Neither of them bothered to pause and acknowledge his presence, and it wasn't until he retched painfully into the porcelain bowl that they stopped making out long enough to grimace at the noise.

"Sorry," he muttered. His hand missed his mouth the first two times he tried to swipe his face clear of any stray flecks of vomit. "You guys, uh, be safe."

They were too busy fumbling around to give him a proper response. He tried not to think of the way she leaned her head back, hair draping over her shoulders. It reminded him too much of Sabrina's profile when she tilted away from him.

He hadn't heard from her since then.

For whatever reason, the memory of the movie theater seats, tacky with drying sugar and congealed substances better left unknown, made him retch again. Stomach walls contracted painfully, but there was nothing left to vomit up any more, for better or worse. Maybe it was best he leave behind memories of illicit orgasms in roach infested cinemas, if not for the murkiness of the situation, then for the way his stomach churned at the thought of her face.

So absorbed was he in the ugly thoughts nagging at the back of his head that he didn't notice the circle of drunken teenagers chanting.

"Here boy!"

"No, make him come here! C'mon!"

"Fuck, come over here."

"Stupid little shit, don't you wanna eat?"

He pressed through throngs of people to find a few boys squatting, clearly plastered, surrounded by even more, slightly less drunk teens. Between them cowered a small, furry animal, trembling like a leaf in a thunderstorm.

"That's cheating, you fucking prick."

"Isn't cheating that your dog's so fucking retarded."

"It's just some runt my sister took in. My dad wants to leave it on the highway, it keeps pissing on things." He snapped impatiently at the stray, which jumped in response. "Come here, turdbreath."

“Hey,” Uzu said. He tried elbowing his way closer towards the center of the crowd, but someone’s hand shoved hard against his ribs and he stumbled back, nausea rising up to burn away at the enamel in his mouth. “Hey,” he said, a little louder, trying to raise his voice over the growing din. “Can we, like, not,”

“Shut the fuck up, faggot,” someone called out in response.

The jeers from the drunken boys were getting louder, so he scrambled to his feet (no small feat, as the room spun a little). By now, the entire party, sans lovers still lodged away in the nooks and crannies of the apartment, seemed to have converged around the boys and the mutt.

This was going to require a little bit of higher thinking.

Most of the alcohol scattered on various surfaces was either cheap beer going stale in plastic cups or being soaked into the cheap rug. With most of the party busy watching what was sure to be an excellent fight, there was nobody guarding the hard liquor, bottles crowding the table in the kitchen. He looked longingly at a full bottle of Bacardi. There was no going back after he pulled this stunt. But for a moment, Uzu hesitated. This was on a level of stupid that he rarely reached, even drunk. Then he heard another whine that could only have been the sound of a hurt animal, and Uzu made his first Bad Decision of the night.

Luckily, the city was bustling tonight, and he waited for a particularly loud police siren to seize the Bacardi and smash it against the wall.

“COPS!”

The crowd started all at once. Dozens of teenagers scrambled for their things, others for the door. Amidst the stampeding drunk adolescents, he heard a high pitched squeak, and he cursed himself for not thinking ahead. Uzu dove into the crowd, hands and feet, crawling over sticky carpet and empty beer cans until he felt fur bump into his hand. The little animal looked up at him, and something warm that wasn’t literal puke rose in his chest. Before he’d realized what he was doing, he squatted besides the tiny ball of fur and stretched a hand out, cautiously.

The puppy flinched, and Uzu’s hand jerked back. *Okay, no go, maybe-*

Something small and damp pressed against his knee, and he glanced back down to see the little mutt pressing up by his leg, curious. His nose pressed up against Uzu’s jeans, curious as to who he was. Uzu blinked. The puppy looked back, and as if on cue, nipped the finger he’d left dangling in front of him.

This was when Uzu made his second Bad Decision Of The Night.

Smuggling two 40s out of a party was one thing. Stealing a puppy was another thing entirely. Doing both at the same time while trying to climb down a rusted fire escape, however, proved to be much less cool and rebellious than he’d thought it’d be, and more prone to scrapes that made him feel grateful he’d had his tetanus shots recently. Stragglers from other parties and bougie bar crawling hipsters navigating the neighborhood slurred out pop songs below him,

arms slung over each other. Nobody noticed the tiny slip of a punk kid crawling out of a dumpster, ill-gotten gains clutched tightly to an anemic chest.

Through the blur of the alcohol still in his system, he managed to navigate the fluorescent, much-too-bright subway from memory, thanking the 24-hour transport system and greasy fast food for keeping him going through the night. For once he let his face slump against the cool metal poles, flourishing with bacteria and god knew what else, too tired to care. Nobody spared him more than a passing disapproving glance at the teenager with the mutt in his arms. The puppy was still gnawing at the McDonald's wrappers long after the burger he'd fed him was gone into the seemingly cavernous belly of the tiny beast. Uzu had the sneaking suspicion that nobody had properly fed him in a long time.

If getting down a rusted fire escape with stolen animals and alcohol was difficult, it was somehow even harder to get up one, even when it was as well worn and familiar as his own. Teeth clenched tighter around the bag of rapidly wilting fries in his mouth (a midnight snack, perhaps. Something had to soften the blow of the beer in the morning). He hoisted himself into his window and crashed into the floor, knocking over a stack of CDs in the process.

Uzu needed some water. He carefully set his booty aside and shucked off his boots, creeping out of his room with extreme care to not step on the creakier of the floorboards. Where there should have been darkness, there was a silhouette, made possible only by the overhead bulb flickering in the way that signalled they were past due for a replacement. The light was still on in the kitchen, and he wasn't alone.

At first, the crumpled shape draped over the wooden table looked like nothing more than a garbage bag they'd forgotten to take out, but as he neared it, he realized it was breathing. A closer look distinguished familiar limbs, and the dark green sweater that had once belonged to their father. Tsubo was deeply asleep, slumped over a mug of now-cold tea and assorted books.

Guilt bubbled in the back of his throat.

But if guilt knotted his lungs, the grateful slurping of the dog drinking from his brother's favorite bowl eased it, and the bed was much too easy to fall into, blankets be damned.

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. But Uzu wasn't Catholic, and God had clearly never had a hangover. His eyelids fell open, just enough to catch a familiar shape sitting by him, and let them droop closed in exhaustion.

"Go away."

"Uzu," Tsubo said helplessly. "What the hell."

“That’s another dollar for the swear jar,” Uzu mumbled instinctively, and immediately regretted it. His brother looked at him for a long moment, and then, in a few brisk strides, crossed the room and threw the curtains open. Uzu hissed like a cat and burrowed deeper under his covers at the sudden light, but strong hands grabbed him by the back of his shirt and tugged fiercely. He kicked, stubborn, but his jeans were still tangled around his ankles from last night. Instead of kicking him away, all he was able to do was knock Tsubo’s inner leg hard enough to make him gasp in pain, and he crumpled instead, momentum dragging them both down onto the floor in a heap.

“Ow.”

“Why a dog, Uzu.” Tsubo’s voice was strained. Uzu couldn’t tell if it was from pain or sheer exhaustion. “You can barely take care of yourself.”

“I can totally take care of myself-”

“You showed up home, drunk, at four AM, with a stolen dog. You cut school to fool around and smoke weed. All you do is play guitar and commit petty crimes. How are you gonna take care of a dog?”

“I can take care of him-”

“I can barely take care of *you* , for Christ’s sake.”

They lay in silence for a moment too long. Uzu squirmed uncomfortably under his brother’s weight.

“Dude, you’re crushing me.”

Tsubo sighed and rolled off of him, still visibly annoyed. “The dog’s a she, by the way.”

“Is not. Vicious-”

“Vicious?”

“As in Sid? Sid Vicious?”

“You named your dog after a heroin addict?”

“I named my dog after the legendary bassist,” Uzu snapped. “Sex Pistols?”

“I know who Sid Vicious was, but that doesn’t change the fact that Sid’s a girl.”

Uzu scoffed. “Oh yeah? How do you know?”

“Did you even bother to check?”

“Well-”

“She squatted on your Fall Out Boy sweatshirt and I was too pissed off at you to keep her from peeing on it.”

“Wh- that’s a Warped Tour exclusive- dude, what the *fuck* -”

Tsubo did not flinch. “Swear jar.”

“ *Fuck* the swear jar.” He dug a few crumpled bills out of his pocket and shoved him into his brother’s hand. “I’m keeping her, and you can’t stop me.” Sid licked his knee and looked up at him with big puppy eyes.

The sweatshirt didn’t seem that important all of the sudden, for some reason.

“She’s going to be huge, Uzu.” Tsubo crouched down by him, hand outstretched. Sid licked it eagerly. “That’s a lot of work.”

“So?”

“Big-big. I think there’s some Great Dane in here. Definitely some boxer, too. Bulldog, some border collie- big, strong, energetic. She’s gonna be a handful and you’re gonna have to take care of her. And then there’s medical stuff to take care of and- where the hell did you get her? She’s all skin and bone.”

Uzu shrugged. “Finders keepers. Do we have any hamburger meat left over?”

Tsubo stared at him for a moment before standing up again. “You get it. She’s your dog.”

“You owe me a new shirt.”

“You owe *me* a social life. Go get your own damn meat.”

Uzu smirked. “Swear jar.”

She wouldn’t talk to him in the car either.

“Ryuko, what’s wrong-”

Ryuko did not answer. Instead, she pressed a paper bag to his chest, and he caught a whiff of sweet indica.

“Thanks for picking it up.”

She looked like she was about to say something, but instead, she avoided eye contact, pupils darting out of his gaze. “You’re welcome.”

Anger was melting away into defeat. There was an exhausted quality to her words that struck him as odd. He was missing something obvious, that much was for sure.

“Y’know, I can play the guitar solo from *Hotel California* .”

“Uh-huh.”

“It got me laid once.”

“Huh.”

He racked his brains for something else to say.

“So like… are you a lesbian? Do you swing both ways? All ways?”

“Dude, don’t try it. I’m not that drunk.”

He glanced sideways. Ryuko was a bit flushed and slouching low in her seat, head lolling just enough that he could tell the beers and margaritas had gotten to her.

“I wasn’t propositioning you.”

“I didn’t think you were. Drugs fuck with your refractory period, anyway.”

He ignored the dig. “I’m just curious, sorry. I mean, I like boys and girls pretty much the same? But I’ve been itching to eat someone out lately, and I thought you could relate.”

Ryuko snorted obnoxiously. “Look, Uzu. I like you plenty, but I’m not exactly sure our relationship has gotten to the level where we can casually exchange tips about pearl diving in broad daylight.”

“Do I look like I need tips on giving head?”

She paused. “Well, I am a gal that’s been in a fair share of relationships where we both had the same equipment, so…”

“Do I not look like the type to give out mustache rides out like flyers? Because if I don’t, I need to get a hat or something that advertises the fact.”

Her eyes looked like they were rolling back into her skull.

“Sure, definitely get a shirt that says ‘sit on my face’. Yes, because that totally doesn’t scream ‘raging douchebag’.”

“That’s harsh.”

“You need someone in your life to give it to you straight, and here I am."

“You're about as straight as Iori's hair."

“Ditto.” In spite of herself, a smile flickered across her face, but it was gone as soon as it was visible.

“I wasn’t a fan of *Fear and Loathing* , y’know.”

“This is Texas, not Vegas. Also, I can’t see how it’s relevant.”

“It’s still the desert, and look how you handled *that* . Couldn’t even fuck Satsuki without making the front of the *Enquirer*-”

“We didn’t even fuck-”

She cut him off with a brisk wave of her hand. “Whatever. You read a lot of Kerouac when you were in high school? Y’know, do the whole sex ‘n’ drugs ‘n’ rock and roll road trip thing across the desert? ”

“If you’re thinking of the desert, you’re thinking of Thompson. If you’re thinking of the girls, you’re thinking of *On The Roa* -”

“Who fucking cares, they were both sad lushes anyway.” Ryuko turned her face away pointedly. “Not that I can say much, I’m drunk and the sun’s still up. How pathetic.”

Realization dawned on him as the scent of marijuana wafted up from the inside of his jacket. Uzu’s stomach gurgled unpleasantly, in a way he wasn’t sure he could blame on the nacho plate. “Uh, Ryuko…”

“Bite me. You’ve gotten me to sink to your level, what else do you want from me?”

“What’s *wrong* ?”

He could immediately tell he would regret asking. Her entire torso swiveled towards him, barely restrained by the seat belt.

“ *~Oooooh, I’m Uzu Sanageyama and* I *don’t do coke anymore~* ”

Uzu swatted away the gesturing hands. “Oh, come on-”

“You took me out to pick up drugs? Like, that’s your idea of a day with friends, pick up drugs, eat, do drugs?”

“It’s not like it was a date or anything! We’re just hanging out-”

“For fuck’s sake, Uzu, you’re lucky you bought me lunch. Don’t you have anything better to do than coke, twinks and self-sabotage?”

“Coke isn’t even that bad if you space it out long enough,” he responded, after a long and deliberate pause.

“You told Shiro you weren’t doing it anymore.”

“Iori hasn’t so much as had a puff off a cigarette in his entire damn life, and I’m not taking advice from someone who’s never popped anything harder than a fucking Tylenol.”

“Because you’re handling your drug intake in a sensible and responsible manner, right.”

“Wh-”

She cut him off. “Just keep popping bars and getting guitars smashed over your head at concerts. It fits your image perfectly, which is that of a guy barrelling straight over the edge of a cliff. You know nobody bought that ‘it was a setup!’ schtick, right?”

“Hey,” Uzu protested. “It was a spur of the moment word choice. I shouldn’t have kissed her.”

“An ‘I take offense to that last one’ response? Where’s your self-respect? I’d buy it if you’d actually kissed her.”

A heavy whine rang in his ears. Hands tightened their grip on the steering wheel, a perfect ten and two.

“How-”

“That stage trick only works from a front angle,” Ryuko said dismissively. “I don’t get it, though. Why the others, and not her?”

“You saw what she did to my face just for pretending.” Knuckles whitened, pale against the smooth black leather. “I’d be six feet under if I’d actually gone through with it.”

“You know, call me crazy, but I don’t think that’s it.”

“Don’t psychoanalyze me, Jung.”

“This isn’t even psychoanalysis. Calling it that would be an affront to the psychiatric field.”

“What do you wanna call it, then?” He was very aware of the growing realization on Ryuko’s face, staring dead at his head. “A delusional misunderstanding?”

“For fuck’s sake, Uzu, who do you think you’re fooling with that routine? It’s an easy observation to make.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Uzu managed through gritted teeth. “What, pray tell, Doctor Matoi, are you implying?”

“I’m drunk and even I can tell you’re blushing.”

“I’m not-” A hand reflexively flew to his face, only to falter at the huge smirk spreading across Ryuko’s face. “Oh, *fuck* you.”

“I knew it.” Ryuko banged her fist on her window triumphantly. “I fucking knew it.”

“It’s not-”

“You have a *crush* on her?”

“What are we, middle schoolers?”

“That’s not a no, Sanageyama.”

“I plead the fifth.”

She settled back in her seat, looking insufferably smug. The desert foliage streaked past them, dense shrubbery haloing her head in light, and in the confined space of the car she looked like she was glowing. “ *Wow* .”

“Look-” Uzu began, and then slumped his shoulders. “It’s nothing serious.”

Ryuko arched an eyebrow. “Nothing serious.”

“We’re friends, we’re close, I’ve known her for six years and we’ve rarely been apart since. Sometimes things just, happen, they don’t mean anything-”

“Sanageyama.” Ryuko steepled her fingers dramatically, an action made funnier by her lack of coordination and the obvious effort it demanded from her. “Why are you so afraid to love.”

“I’m not love her,” he blurted out. “I mean, I don’t *love* her. I mean, I do, but as a friend, I’m not in love with her, I just, love her, and also think she’s cute, but we’re friends, and I don’t *love* her love her, it’s just, I- *fuck* . Fuck, okay, *listen*- ”

Uzu couldn’t help but be impressed by how straight of a face Ryuko was maintaining.

“Wow,” she repeated, this time, with an accompanying chuckle and a hand pressed to her temples. “You’re so fucked.”

He sighed wearily. The road ahead as far as the horizon was one endless road, a stripe in the desert, and he was suddenly exhausted. “Just gonna let me dig my own grave?”

“All I had to do was give you the shovel.”

“I trust you to respect our doctor-patient confidentiality.”

“You said it yourself, dude. I ain’t your shrink. I’m just your friend.” She paused. “Though, seeing as I’m currently fucking Nonon, you probably couldn’t have chosen a worse person to tell.”

“ *You’re* the one who went searching. And I haven’t confessed shit.”

“ *Yet* .”

He gave her a look. “You know, curiosity killed the cat.”

“But satisfaction brought it back.” Ryuko stretched out lazily. “Drive faster. I wanna be taking bong hits before my buzz wears off.”

His groan could be heard over the engine roar as they sped further along the highway.

He was fifteen, finally, and then it was winter, and then it was the week before their winter break when Alex kissed someone else in the hallway in the morning instead of Yennifer. Uzu watched her face crumple, but there was an air of resignation in her eyes that told him she’d known how this would end. He found her by the bodega that never carded them after class, smoking a Pall Mall and leaning against the brick wall tagged by dozens of kids before them.

“You okay?”

She turned to look him dead in the eye. “Why would I tell *you* ?”

Uzu sat down by her feet with a grunt. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“Like I said, not really in the mood to talk right now, dude.” She flicked her ash impatiently. “Y’know, kinda heartbroken and all that.”

“It’s not that serious. You knew he was sleeping around. He used you.”

“I know. But I’m still allowed to be upset.” Despite her words, she slid down to sit next to him. “He’s just the kind of guy you wanna be around, you know?”

“Yeah. I know.”

“I never got why you did, though.”

“Huh?”

Yennifer looked at him like he was stupid. “You’re too charismatic to be dealing shitty weed for some ugly fuck who can’t even make me come.”

“I- what?” Uzu looked at her blankly. “People follow Alex.”

Her eye roll in response was more than enough of an answer.

“Are you *blind* ? I know for a fact that Antoine and Mark and Sabrina wouldn’t show up if they heard you weren’t gonna be there. People actually *like* you.”

“I’d rather not… talk about Sabrina.”

“Why not?”

“It got… weird between us.”

Understanding bloomed across her face.

“You guys did it, didn’t you.”

He was silent.

“Did you guys fuck? You *did* . I knew it. She’s got a thing for shorter guys. Did she come onto you? Did you guys actually- oh, come on, dude, give me something juicy.”

Uzu hesitated before answering.

“It was… once. Not a big of a deal.”

“Did she swipe your v-card?”

She took his averted gaze as a yes, apparently, because she snorted loudly. “I figured. She liked to collect those.”

“I mean, only if we’re not counting… other stuff as sex.”

Yennifer sighed. “You know what I mean.”

“I mean, I guess? It’s whatever.”

“That’s why Alex picked me, I think.” She tilted her head up to look at something- what, he couldn’t tell- and sighed a second time. “He goes through people as he gets bored. It’s too much drama to deal with him, but I can’t avoid him if I wanna keep partying. I’m not gonna let my social life die because of my ex, y’know?”

“Yeah.”

“Dating him was the stupidest fucking thing I’ve ever done. Did you know he keeps trying to get me to fuck him even after he started dating Melissa, of all people? Can you believe him? I don’t wanna be your backup fleshlight.”

“I feel that.” Uzu rubbed his neck on instinct, a fresh hickey warm under his fingers. “It’s a matter of like, self-respect? I think?”

She dug into her pocket for another cigarette, talking all the while. “Maybe our lives would be better if we stopped hooking up with assholes.”

“Maybe.”

There was silence between them, only punctuated by the click of her lighter and the quiet exhale of nicotine and smoke, stuttered out so he knew she was laughing under her breath without having to turn to look.

“You’re not that bad, Uzu.”

“I get that a lot.” Uzu fidgeted as she puffed away on her cigarette. “I just try not to be a dick.”

“It’s more fun to hang with people who aren’t dicks, generally speaking.”

“So why *do* you hang out with them?”

She gave him a look. The lit Pall Mall was held away from her hair, wrist cocked delicately, and for a moment she looked more like a vintage movie starlet than a fifteen year old art student sitting on a busy Manhattan sidewalk.

“Don’t go all Stuyvesant on my ass. What do you want me to say? I just like having fun. I’m sure you feel the same. You’re a sweet guy.”

Uzu hesitated, and then he leaned forward. Yennifer jerked away before he could fully press his mouth to hers.

“Whoa. Don’t make me take that back.”

Embarrassment colored him pink. “I thought… it felt right- I mean, you were crying earlier, and I thought… ugh, forget about it. I’m sorry. I just… like kissing.” He pressed his hands to his face as if to stem the flood of blood rushing into his cheeks. “Please forget I ever did that.”

Yennifer’s face twisted into a wry smile, as if in spite of herself.

“Just because we have the same shitty exes doesn’t mean I wanna kiss you, y’know.” She stood with surprising grace. “But I know what you mean, even if I don’t feel like jumping your bones.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “It was a stupid impulse.”

She shrugged. “It’s cool. I gotta dip, anyway.”

“Leaving already?”

Yennifer shifted her weight from one leg to the next. “I have dance practice, and my mom’s at work so my sister’s driving me there. I gotta walk over to her job before her shift ends.”

That was right, she was in the dance department. Lithe and lean and muscular and tall where he was gawky and underfed-looking, no matter how many burgers he ate after class, graceful where he was clumsy. No wonder Alex had him as a backup, she was halfway grown where he was still a runt at five feet in high school, gelled up hair and Doc Martens desperately trying to compensate for lost inches.

“Ah.” His face felt like it was steaming hot. “Uh, good luck.”

“Maybe you can write me something for my next performance.” Before Uzu could even begin to process her words, she swooped down and gave him a peck on the cheek. “Thank you for listening.”

“Uhhh,”

Words failed him as she waved goodbye airily, already halfway down the block before he’d composed himself enough to shout a ‘see you later,’ across the street, voice breaking spectacularly halfway through. The cold from the cement under his ass was seeping in through his jeans, fingers numb. Their conversation had left a leaden weight in his stomach, one that hurt almost as bad as that brand on his neck where Alex had pressed his mouth against it. He was a liar, and yet Yennifer had believed him when he’d made her think he wasn’t the worst person in the world.

Call it guilt. Call it penance. Call it atonement, appeasement of a higher power, if there really was someone up there. He was giving up boys for Lent, so to say.

He ignored the messages that made his Sidekick buzz against his leg in his pocket, asking him to meet in the bathroom, or the staircase. He ducked into classrooms when he caught sight of him in the hall, ready to ask him to distribute some skunk level shit. Uzu figured he’d get the message eventually.

And lo and behold, it didn’t take too long before Alex caught sight of the two of them, Yennifer’s arm locked with his protectively, and put two and two together.

“Shoulda figured,” he sneered. “Sluts stick together.”

Yennifer’s face flushed, and something scarlet flickered in the back of his skull, white hot and tasting of rust. Every line in his face was more punchable than the next, but the girl besides him was gripping onto his sleeve, a silent plea to hold it together.

“He just wants a reaction,” she muttered. “Don’t let him get to you.”

And so he grit his teeth and kept walking, her nails digging into him through the thin sleeves of his t-shirt.

Maybe Catholicism was contagious. It’d certainly explain the sudden moral guilt that gnawed at him every time he remembered kissing Alex in a tiny bathroom stall. Yennifer’s home was cramped, every corner filled with another seven day candle with *la Virgen de Guadalupe* printed onto it, or a crucifix, or rosary beads dropped where her mother had been interrupted mid-prayer.

“Sorry,” she apologized. “My parents are really religious.”

“It’s nice,” Uzu said.

“You don’t have to worry about offending me, dude.” Yennifer’s head leaned against his shoulder, and the shift in her weight crinkled the plastic cover of the sofa. “I know it’s a dump.”

But he hadn't been lying to her. The TV was bigger than the one Tsubo had let him put in his room, and he didn't even mind people darting across the cramped living room, apologizing in hushed voices that they had to cross to get to the bathroom. The Bronx apartment always smelled of cinnamon incense and bodega brand soap and something homey stewing in the kitchen. Yennifer's sister, Mercedes, offered them rides to the mall, if she wasn't busy bickering with her younger sister, and Yennifer's mom always fed him before he left, supervising his departure where Yennifer would squeeze him tight and thank him for coming over. He caught them talking about him occasionally, and the conversation always went the same way.

"*Dime, mija- es tu novio*?"

"*No, mama,*" Yennifer's voice was clearly exasperated. "*Solo somos amigos, te lo juro*."

"*No quiero que vengas a esta casa con ese chico sin que este aqui*."

"*No te preocupes, mama*."

Her mother paused and poked her head out of the kitchen. "Usu, would you like something to drink?"

They'd go back and forth, and she'd come back, apologizing for leaving him alone on the couch to entertain her six year old brother, who inevitably found his spiky hair to be the most fascinating thing in the world. They watched entire seasons of cartoons, Blockbuster rental after rental, until her mom started eyeing the clock and offering him leftovers to take back to his brother in her accented english.

The rumors started in March, after weeks of walking down the halls like they were attached at the hip.

"Are they fucking?"

"No way,"

"She's totally sleeping with him."

"He's gay, everyone knows that-"

"I heard he's doing the music for her recital final."

"They can't be fucking, I heard she likes them big."

"She just wants a gay accessory piece."

"Is he her gay best friend?"

"She's totally his beard."

“Heard they were hooking up.”

“I saw them at Stephen’s party last week-”

“That’s *totally* a covered up hickey, dude.”

The truth lay somewhere between all of those. Uzu couldn’t read her at all. She let him grind against her in the middle of a sea of drunk, dancing teenagers. They shotgunned hits off the butt end of a dying joint, to save the money, lips grazing against each other before pulling away. She’d fall asleep on the couch with him, arm wrapped around her shoulder, her hair falling down his chest, tiny and warm like a furnace as movie credits rolled on the television screen. They burned through their minutes chatting late, he helped her through the MTA when she was giggly drunk and leaning against him for support.

But he had the sneaking suspicion that she trusted him too much to like him like that, and anyway, he was the type to get easily hung up on anyone who was nice to him for more than five minutes at a time without asking for anything in return.

Even still, he thought of smirking white boys guiding his head down whenever he jacked off at night, shuddering into his hand, and not her, which had to count for *something* in the grand scheme of things, right?

“We’re just friends,” he told Tsubo. “But not friends like you and Marina, like you told me you were.”

His brother looked a little red around the ears still, his girlfriend sitting cross legged on the couch with his shirt on, still. “Please shut up.”

“Also, I’m sorry for not knocking.”

“An eye for an eye, I guess.” Tsubo groaned and rubbed his temples. “We’ll talk about this later. I have to call her a cab.”

Months flitted by with her hands slipping into his, kisses pressed to his cheeks whenever she said goodbye, heart stuttering in confusion when she kissed him full on the mouth, too drunk to do anything but scream and laugh and sway along to the deafening blast of radio singles played too loud too fast too hard, for her to wake up only halfway sober in his bed, fully dressed under the blankets and ask him what she’d done the night before-

(call your mom to tell her you were staying at Andrea’s house, crack your phone screen, puke on the front steps, kick me out of bed so I had to sleep on the floor)

and she’d laugh and call him a gentleman. Sid licked at her fingers, hoping for a treat, and she rubbed her head and called her beautiful.

(He brought her crackers and ginger ale and water and helped her to the subway, where she threw her arms around his neck and called him her best friend.)

Her friendship, or whatever it was, was increasingly the only thing worth going to school for. He couldn't walk past Alex or his former friends without them making lewd hand gestures and ugly suggestions and comments on everything he'd ever done (and some he hadn't). A recent bust had made it harder to get some pocket money- the new security guards weren't as lenient as the old ones, who had purposefully turned blind eyes to the deals he made in between classes. His teachers demanded more from him (you have so much potential/you're so talented/pay attention, again and again), so when he wasn't with her he was playing with scabbed fingers until his strings wore and snapped, playing scales until blisters popped over the ivory keys, until he was breathing in perfect pitch, heartbeat tuned to a metronome, soul turned to song.

I'm gonna make it if it kills me.

Exams went by in a blur, summer on the horizon like an oasis, just far enough ahead to drive the entire school into a hysterical frenzy of energy. Yennifer pressed tickets to her recital into his hand before the subway doors closed between them, mouthing 'or else!' through the streaky plastic windows.

It was three days before Memorial Day weekend when his life went wrong forever.

"So like, the first time I did coke was at this party with the like, kids from Columbia Prep? All the kids at the smarty pants schools were crazy. Wired on Adderall 24/7 or smoked up constantly. At my school they were just dropping acid and drinking whiskey in class."

Ryuko nodded thoughtfully. She'd zoned out considerably after the second bowl, and now she was stretched out on Uzu's bed, flopped over like a sleepy toddler. "I went to boarding school for most of my life. We had regular room inspections and probation if you got caught and shit, so you had to be really careful. New York City schools sound like a trip."

"Yeah, well, we were one of the bigger magnet schools for the arts. You meet some weird ass people. Wild shit."

Her eyes drooped. The dealer hadn't lied to her, after all. "This is some nice stuff. You're good at seeking out connections. Cool talent."

"I just have a ton of practice." His voice rang with an undercurrent of pride. "Thanks, though."

There was definitely a nasty pun she could make at his expense here, but Uzu looked so genuinely pleased with her compliment she didn't have the heart to do it. "You smoke with Nonon and the nerd, right?"

"Yeah, Non' and Megamind." Uzu stretched out, notably less lethargic than her. "They're good smoking buddies. Inu's fucking hilarious when he's stoned, and Nonon is actually

tolerable when she isn't being mean to everything within fifty miles of her. It mellows her out."

"Can't believe you have a crush on her." She reached for the remote and stretched her neck to look at the TV screen. "You wanna rent the first season of *Game of Thrones* ?"

His spluttering reminded her that although she was fond of this lanky, tatted up wreck of a rockstar, it was still fucking funny to screw with him, heart be damned.

"Don't *call* it that."

"Who knows?" Ryuko rolled over onto her side to grin at him. "Maybe she'll get tired of carpet munching."

"I'm pretty sure she's gay."

Ryuko cycled through the listings onscreen. " *You're* gay."

"And so are you? What's your point?"

Ryuko did not have the mental coordination necessary to have this argument at the moment. "Bisexuality is a thing that exists, y'know."

"She's too busy being in love with Satsuki and getting laid by you to even think about me. Also, she's my friend before anything else." Uzu's face soured. "I'm not in the mood to talk about this, really."

"I'm sorry," she said, and meant it. "They don't have *Game of Thrones* . How about *Gilmore Girls* ?"

Uzu sighed dramatically. " *Gilmore Girls* is fine."

"Oi, Sanageyama."

He'd long gotten accustomed to the heckling he endured every time he crossed paths with his former fuckbuddy. As long as it stayed in the verbal realm, though, he could deal with it. Alex might have been a beanpole of a teenager, but he was two years older, shaved regularly, and had at least seven inches on him.

"Heard you wrote the music for Gutierrez's performance."

Uzu pointedly ignored him. This was an impressive feat, considering Alex was literally leaning on the locker next to him, so close he could hear him breathing.

“Excited to see what music you make together.” Pause. “What, cat got your tongue? It’d be the first time.”

Nothing. He wasn’t gonna give him the satisfaction. This irritated him.

“You fucking her or what?” Alex flicked him on the forehead. “She was such an easy lay, I don’t know why I’m asking.”

“Don’t touch me.” Uzu kept his voice steady, but he’d already given in just by reacting. Alex smirked.

“Oh, so you can talk after all.”

“What do you want.”

“I was just curious. Interested in catching up with you, no strings attached.”

“Did Melissa dump you or something? You’re gonna have to find someone else to suck your dick.”

Immediate regret spasmed in his chest at the way Alex’s countenance darkened. “Not like you were any good at it.”

“Hit a nerve?” He could see the muscles in his jaw flexing as he grit his teeth. If there was one thing he was bad at, it was quitting while he was ahead. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Watch your mouth, you fucking fag.” Alex gripped a fistful of shirt and yanked at his collar, forcing him onto his tiptoes. “It’s only good for one thing, and it ain’t talkin’.”

“Didn’t you just accuse me of fucking your ex?” Uzu managed. “Am I banging Yennifer or am I your Freudian ghost of homosexuality past? Pick a struggle. You’re not getting laid, either way.”

The first fist to the face was a stunner. He hadn’t expected Alex to punch him in clear view of the security cameras, even if their functionality was questionable at best. He stumbled away, reeling from the blow.

And maybe, just maybe, if he weren’t an idiot, if he weren’t 50% impulse and 50% anger and 100% pure adrenaline, he would have remembered there were security guards patrolling the area, and that there were maybe forty seconds before the bell rang and the halls flooded with people. But Uzu *was* impulsive, and angry, and small, and as anybody who was small knew, you went all out to win or died trying in a fight, and Uzu liked to *win* .

Alex seemed taken aback when he charged him, his tiny body slamming into his, knocking them both onto the floor. The linoleum underneath them was filthy with the collected grime of nearly an entire day’s worth of dirt tracked in from the student’s shoes, and the elder of the two boys was a bag of bones and skin. Alex wasn’t much of a cushion for their fall, but Uzu still grabbed on, thighs squeezing his to gain leverage. The two scrambled up, halfway grabbing at each other in their attempts to knock each other over before they fully managed

to get on their feet, swiping erratically. Uzu took two more swings to the face before he was able to connect a punch properly.

He landed a blow to the throat, and Alex wheezed for breath. The precious few seconds it would take him to recover were all Uzu needed to tackle him around the knees and force him back to the ground, where he managed to straddle him properly and knock him straight in the face.

“Is this pose familiar to you?” Alex spat. His hands gripped him by the head and jerked sideways, forcing him off of him. Uzu tumbled over onto the floor, knocking his elbow. The jolt of pain incapacitated him just long enough for Alex to stand up and kick him square in the stomach. “No, you like being on your knees better, right?”

Uzu gagged from the impact. The second kick was straight in the ribs, and he swore he heard something give way. He grabbed him by the pant leg and yanked with all his strength, slowing him enough to cling on tight, even as the older boy tried to shake him free.

“Hey! Hey! No fighting in the halls!”

A security guard was jogging towards them from the end of the hall, but there was a hand ripping his hair free from his scalp, and his half forgotten kendo training rushing through his veins. Head, body, wrist.

Men, dou, kote.

He pulled Uzu up all the way. A forearm pressed into his windpipe, and his sight flickered black at the edges.

Men, dou, kote.

Teeth broke skin. Blood ran down his jaw. Alex yelped and let go, the sudden rush of oxygen almost dizzying. He scrambled for something heavy, something solid-

Men-

Even later, he never remembered where the skateboard had come from, or why he’d lunged for it then. In fact, his actions were entirely informed by the security footage they played back in the oppressive stillness of the superintendent's office.

“Mister Sanageyama.”

That’s my father’s name, Uzu was tempted to quip. Unfortunately, the recklessness that had landed him in this plastic seat (door flanked by security officers) facing a balding man with ugly glasses seemed to have completely abandoned him. Something told him he wasn’t going to be able to smarm his way out of this one.

“Are you aware of the extent of Mr. Richardson’s injuries, Mr. Sanageyama?”

Mister A.J. Baker (the plaque was shiny and ostentatious on the already-tacky mahogany desk in the cramped room) was butchering the pronunciation of his surname, but Uzu doubted correcting him would win him any favors here. “Alexander attacked me first.”

“That’s not what I asked, Uzu.”

Uzu took a deep breath. “He has a concussion?”

“He’s got an orbital fracture, a hairline jaw fracture, two broken ribs, and a broken nose. They’re going to need to stitch up his face.”

“... and a concussion?” Uzu asked weakly.

“And a concussion.” Superintendent Baker folded his hands. “What do you have to say for yourself, young man?”

Uzu did everything in his power to keep a neutral expression on his face. “I just wanted him to stop hitting me.”

“You beat him to a pulp, long after he stopped. With a *weapon,* might I add.”

His eyes wandered to the window behind Baker’s chair. The sunlight streaming in cheerfully was the only light in the claustrophobic room, illuminating the figures inside and a pathetic spider plant hanging from the side of a bookshelf.

“So you’re going to expel me?”

“Uzu, I’m going to be frank with you.” Baker folded his doughy hands together and leaned back in his chair. “Assault on this level is usually prosecuted, should his family press charges. This is easily grounds for arrest.

“I…”

“Uzu?”

There was no response from him. He had the image of his gravestone clearly in his mind. His father was going to kill him. Uzu’s heart thumped hollowly behind his ribs, the words piercing between them like they were trying to play Jenga with his bones. “Yes, sir?”

“We know you’re being hazed. That’ll protect you from the worst of the lawsuit, seeing as we’ve got witnesses that have attested to Mister Richardson bullying you for some time. We found a sizable quantity of marijuana on his person- was he trying to get you to sell for him?”

A lifeline.

“Yes,” Uzu blurted. “That’s exactly what was going on.”

“So why,” the Superintendent continued, “did you not come to someone in a position of power for help?”

“I…” He searched for words in vain. “Snitches get stitches?”

Baker let out a chortle he immediately attempted to conceal by coughing.

“You certainly gave Alexander his fair share of those.” He sighed and settled further back into his chair. “We’re going to hold you for a while until we can get ahold of someone to pick you up. The nurse says you should be alright as long as you keep ice on your injuries and keep them clean. Now, I’ve been trying to get ahold of your parents…”

The shiny plaque reflected back his reflection through the puffy slits in his face he called eyes. “They’re overseas at the moment.”

“Who are you staying with?”

A lump grew thick in his throat.

“My older brother. He’s a college student.”

“I see.” Baker thumbed the blue piece of cardstock in his hands. “It says here that your father will take international emergency calls collect. Where did you say he was, at the moment?”

“I didn’t.” The lump grew larger. “I think he’s in Singapore right now.”

A pause. Baker’s hand hovered over the phone. “Should we call your brother instead?”

A million nights of finding Tsubo exhausted, slumped over his laptop collaged in his head. Right about now, he would be sitting his final exam.

“Call my dad.”

Baker raised an eyebrow in his direction, but made no comment. Uzu stared at his knees in silence as he punched in the long stream of numbers, every single ring a heavy weight growing in his stomach. There was a click, and then a groan from the other side of the line.

“Who is this, and why are you calling me at two in the morning.” There was nothing but exhaustion and contempt in the man’s voice. “Someone had better be dead or dying.”

Superintendent Baker cleared his throat. “I’m here to call about your son. Uzu?”

“Is he dead?”

“No-”

“Is he in the process of becoming dead?”

“Well, no, but-”

“What did he do this time?”

Everyone in the room fidgeted slightly. Baker looked down at him with something uncomfortably akin to pity.

“Sir, he got into a fight with an older student, who is now in the hospital-”

“If it’s money they want, you’ll have to talk to my lawyer.”

“Sir, your son-”

“Listen. I’ll pay for any damage he’s responsible for. But I’m going to have to ask you to call me again, sometime when it isn’t *two in the morning* .” A pause, and then a few muffled words in Japanese.

“He’s telling my mother it’s just me again,” Uzu translated hollowly. “Telling her to go back to sleep.”

This time, it was *definitely* pity he saw in his eyes.

“Mister Sanageyama, I of course apologize for calling at such an inopportune hour, but this is a serious matter-”

“Can you put him on the line?”

Uzu shakily stretched his hand out to grab the receiver. Baker watched his face pale before he handed it back silently.

“I will contact you in the morning- my time, if you may- fax me or email me the details. I have a meeting at six. Do what you want with him. He could use some discipline in his life,” his father spat through the phone. “Good night. Do not call me again.”

The line went dead again.

“He called me a fucking embarrassment and an accident in every sense of the word.” Uzu said hollowly. “He’ll be in New York by the weekend.”

“I… see.” Baker steepled his fingers and leaned forward. “We’ll have to hold you until your brother is available to pick you up, as you are a minor, you understand.”

He didn’t respond. There was no point.

The superintendent sighed and stood up with a groan. “The officers here will keep an eye on you while I attend my afternoon meeting. You will be on your best behavior, is that understood? No smart mouthing.”

“Can I go to the bathroom?”

“No.”

“What if I gotta go?”

“Officers Berkley and Ruiz will escort you.”

“Are you gonna drug test me?”

“Possibly.”

“Can I-”

“Don’t push it, Uzu.”

The guards looked at him awkwardly as Baker left the room. Uzu sighed and slouched in his seat.

“Do you guys have guns?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever shot someone?”

“Maybe.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

“Kid, have you ever stopped talking?” The taller of the two frowned. “I gotta use the bathroom. Berkley, keep an eye on him.”

Officer Berkley crossed his arms and stared him down. Uzu was well aware of how short he was for a high schooler, but now the difference in their sizes was excruciatingly obvious.

The silence in the room was almost as painful as their size difference.

“So-”

“Don’t try it, kid.”

Uzu closed his mouth. Behind the empty desk was a window, cracked open just enough that he could smell the city smog outside. He wondered how far it was to the next building.

The radio at Berkley’s hip crackled with static. “Officers, officers, do you read? We have a situation in the auditorium, over.”

Berkley pulled the mic to his mouth. “Watching someone right now, over.”

“We’ve got a riot breaking out in the auditorium, all hands requested, over.”

“Guess the seniors are getting a little rowdy now that’s school’s about to let out,” Uzu muttered.

Berkley’s mouth opened and closed, eyes sizing him up. “You have to stay here. Mr. Baker should be back in fifteen minutes or so.”

“The secretary’s right outside,” Uzu complained. “I’m not going anywhere. Plus, that door locks from the outside.”

The relief to be free from his watchdog duties was plain on his face.

“That’s right,” Berkley said, hand already on the door handle. “You wanna leave this room, you’re gonna have to jump out that window.”

The door slam hadn’t even finished echoing through the room before he was prying the window open.

It was about twenty or so feet to the next level of the roof. The school had been built like a block tower, roofs staggered up to the highest floor so that they got smaller the higher up you went. Luckily for him, he was only a floor or two up from the next one. His eyes darted over nervously to the door, locked behind him. If he was lucky, he had maybe two or so minutes before Ruiz came to check he was still here.

Baker hadn’t put any netting on the window. The skateboard he’d confisticated went first- shoved through the window, where it clattered loudly, if unceremoniously against the ground. The loud honking from midtown traffic would camouflage that- if he was lucky. Uzu hesitantly stuck his legs through. The fall would certainly hurt, either way- his eyes looked over the desk anxiously. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to just sit tight?

Then his father’s words echoed in his head, and he grit his teeth.

“Go hard or go home, Uzu,” he whispered to himself, and let himself fall.

I’m going to die, he realized, in the flat, dry way that only certain, factually imminent death could bring. The roof rushed up at him, very much covered in asphalt and very black and very, very solid. Teeth grit in preparation for the inevitable pain.

There was no time to panic, but his body reacted instead. The shock of impact rattled through the rubber soles of his boots to his ankles, and momentum kept him going, head over heels, shoulder digging into the tarmac until he stopped rolling, world spinning, skin scraped raw and bruises forming all over his body. Some blood, certainly, he was sure his brain had been rattled loose, and his tongue was beginning to swell from how hard he’d bitten it, but the intense pain reminded him that, for better or worse, he was still alive, and if he was alive, he had to keep moving.

For the moment, however, he tried to count how many possibly fractured ribs and swelling lumps there were on his shitty, useless teenage body, the sticky heat of the sun warming him through. Below him, the drone of beeping cars felt deeply in sync with the way blood pulsed stubbornly through his veins, overly hot, each heartbeat forcing blood into his wounds. His

body would heal, and so would his pride, but not if he got caught out here like this. He forced himself back up onto his feet, trying not to shake on battered knees.

First thing first: find his stuff.

The skateboard was only a few feet away from the edge of the building. The city swarmed beneath him, and a sudden urge to leap off the side swelled in his lungs, but the moment passed before he could so much as take a step forward. Vertigo had him stumble back a few steps instead, and then he remembered that he had three minutes at best to get out of the camera's line of sight before someone noticed he was gone.

He jumped a turnstile or seven, ducked into crowds, killing time and meshing in with crowds of sweaty late spring commuters until he knew he would be safe, climbed up the fire escape onto the roof again, and locked the door. Nobody was getting up here for a while, even if they did figure out he was here. Dug the little bag he'd had the foresight to hide in his shoe out, and smoked as the sun burned coral over the city skyline, color and tetrahydrocannabinol soothing away the aches in his body until his eyes drooped shut.

When he woke, the temperature had dropped significantly, and there was a loud banging on the metal door that was supposed to be kept locked.

"UZU SANAGEYAMA, I KNOW YOU'RE UP HERE."

Tsubo had never been one to speak louder than necessary. The thinly veiled threat felt awkward and heavy in his voice, but there was no doubt about it- he was caught.

"DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH TROUBLE YOU'RE IN? *OPEN THE DOOR, UZU* ."

Uzu stood shakily. The high that had kept the pain at bay was long gone, and every muscle strand in his body ached, lactic acid collected and black bruises forming with every beat of his heart.

"YOU HAVE *THIRTY SECONDS* TO OPEN THIS DOOR BEFORE I BREAK OFF THE HINGES. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

Thirty seconds? He glanced over at the next roof, only a few feet away, and then down over the side of the building. People could survive three or four flights straight down, couldn't they?

"I'M COUNTING DOWN."

Fuck it. It was *not* going to end like this. He threw his skateboard down over the side, and winced when it clattered loudly against the sidewalk. Legs over, creaky pig iron bars cutting

into his hands- when was the last time he'd had a tetanus shot? These things looked rusty. The whole contraption creaked as he climbed down as fast as he could with sweaty palms, and the last few feet he jumped. There was no time. Up on the roof, the heavy wrenching noise of metal on metal told him Tsubo was making good on his promise. He stumbled against the trash cans in his rush to get into the alleyway, only pausing to grab his skateboard off the ground.

He was halfway down the boulevard when he heard someone shouting behind him.

"UZU-"

Fuck. He darted between confused pedestrians, out for an evening stroll, jaywalking through honking cars, almost at the subway stop-

He was so close to the edge of the street he could see the individual pixels on the crossing signs, when something caught up to him. Something *very* big and *very* solid and *very* heavy, impact jolting him sideways. His vision blurred, the concrete smacking into him for the second time today. Uzu flailed desperately, limbs lashing out trying to get his assailant to get the fuck off of him.

"Are you trying to concuss me?"

If it weren't warm and sweaty and flesh and very much alive, he would have thought it was a very small truck. The mass of fur licked his face.

"Oh. Hello, Sid."

Above him, the nighttime sky was a swirl of stars and airplanes departing from JFK. He couldn't be bothered to move from where he lay sprawled out on the floor, even when Tsubo grabbed him by the arm and pulled him upright.

"You're an idiot."

"I know."

"I meant *that* ." Tsubo gestured towards the skateboard lying a few feet away from him. "Why did you run instead? At least use it, if it's going to get you suspended for beating the shit out of someone with it."

" *Ah* ." Uzu looked at the ground. "That is…a very good point."

The intersection between dream and fantasy and memory had always been a hazy one for him. He didn't know which one this was.

She felt familiar in the way she squirmed around his fingers. He reached in, curling up to find that familiar bump he knew would make her gasp, and knew he was dead center when her hips bucked into his touch,

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured into the crook of her neck. Her skin was salty with sweat, dried tears from repeated orgasms that left her loose and pliable and desperate for more.

Her only response was to inhale sharply, lips trembling with scarcely contained ecstasy, and then cry out when his hand didn’t stop moving. Nails dug into his arm as she rocked him inside of her, grinding down until she stiffened and threw her head back, climax so powerful that all her tired body could do was shake and try to remember to breathe.

When he pulled his fingers free, they were pruning. She looked at him through half lidded eyes while he brought them to his mouth.

“Don’t be lewd.”

“Do you want to taste yourself?”

He offered her his hand, and after only a moment of hesitation, pressed the fingers to her lips. She opened her mouth greedily to suck on them, and a shiver ran down his spine. The look she gave him, fingers in her mouth, makeup smeared about her eyes, was almost enough to get him hard again.

“You’re *adorable* .” Saliva dripped from her tongue and his hand when he pulled it out of her mouth. It was a good look for her. He’d always… *suspected* she had an oral fixation.

“Don’t make fun of me.” Her usual cutting edge had been sanded away from repeated waves of intense pleasure. “You practically came in your pants when I sat on your face.”

“Are you complaining?”

“No,” she admitted.

“I thought so.”

“Shut it.” She rolled over onto her side, chest still heaving. “I hate it when you get smug.”

“Just admit I’m good at this.” Her skin was warm where he lay next to her, hands running through her hair. In that moment, he knew he would die to be allowed to stay by her side forever, or even just kiss her again.

“It’s times like these that make me think I could fall for you.”

Uzu blinked. The scene dissolved into a swirl of Smirnoff aftertaste and the heady smell of smoke. Ryuko was staring glassy eyed at the TV screen, too tall and dark haired and curvy to be *her* .

“Is this hash? I can’t feel my legs.” She wiggled her foot around experimentally. “Am I turning into a mermaid?”

“Nah.” Uzu rolled onto his stomach, pressing his hips down into the mattress of his bed in an attempt to hide the second boner of the day. “I told you to go easy with the gravity bong, but you didn’t listen, did you?”

“Why aren’t there any mermaids in Spongebob, Uzu. They’re underwater.”

“I don’t know, Ryuko. I don’t know.”

The yellow kitchen lighting was not doing much to keep the atmosphere of the scene from feeling uncomfortably moody. Uzu sat bare chested on the side of the table while Tsubo fussed over him with a dozen q-tips in his mouth and a pair of tweezers not far away.

“My life is a tragedy.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Tsubo dabbed antiseptic on the scrape on his elbow, earning a hissed “*fuck”* in return. “Stay still. These cuts are all dirty.”

“You’re a traitor, Sid,” Uzu said solemnly. “Bros don’t betray bros like that.”

Sid looked up at the mention of her name, and laid back on the carpet, looking at him with her big brown eyes.

“She loves you, and wants you to stop screwing up so much.” Tsubo pulled another cotton ball out of the first aid kit. “And stay *still.* ”

Uzu scoffed. “What was I *supposed* to do? The guy was wailing on me.”

“Concussing people is generally not an acceptable response to that sort of behavior, at least not in a school environment. We frown upon that kind of thing in polite society.” He rummaged through the bandaid box with a frown on his face. “Are we out of the medium sized ones?”

“He wasn’t polite.”

“You shouldn’t have run, at least,” Tsubo said, tone darkening. “That’s going to cost you dearly. At the very least, you should have had them call me first. I could have softened the blow from Dad-”

“What’d he say?”

Tsubo hesitated before pressing his lips together. “He’s… unhappy.”

“Yeah, no shit, Sherlock. I could have told you that.”

“Maybe it’s best… you talk to him yourself.” Tsubo exhaled through his teeth. “I got the webcam set up and everything, though I’m not sure the Skype connection will hold for long. Put a shirt on. Something nice.”

“Something nice,” Uzu echoed. “Right.”

The connection crackled, as if impatient. Tsubo shoved a plain black t-shirt at him and nudged him towards the desk. The screen flickered with the intensely displeased visage of two very stern looking Japanese adults.

“Father. Mother. I’m sorry.”

“ *Why* do you do this, Uzu.”

If there was one thing his father was good at, it was cutting straight to the chase. Uzu’s mouth opened and closed wordlessly, much like a fish out of water. The air in the room might as well have been water, for how much he was able to breathe.

“I-”

“You know I hate excuses.”

“I was attacked-”

“You halfway killed another student. You understand the consequences of that? Do you know what kind of strain that will put on your relationship with your teachers? How that reflects on us as parents?”

“I-”

“And there were *drugs* involved?”

“There weren’t-” he tried, desperately. “The kid was harassing me.”

“Why didn’t you ask a teacher for help?”

“They never help-”

“Your mother and I have decided to send you to a summer training program in the Alps this summer to help you mellow out. The Swiss are very disciplined, you know. If you behave yourself, you’ll be allowed to go back. If not-”

He slumped back in his seat. The screen flickered out, but the graininess of the image did not keep him from noticing the disgust in every line of their faces.

“I *get it* ,” Uzu snapped. “I’m an embarrassment, a disappointment to the family name, a waste of labor pains.”

“I had a Cesarean,” his mother mumbled.

“Oh, that’s just *excellent* .”

Tsubo nudged Uzu. “Watch your tone.”

“Your brother’s right.” Sanageyama Sr.’s voice seemed to have gotten even colder, if possible. “We’re just trying to straighten you out. That disrespectful attitude has got to be stamped out.”

“ *What* attitude?”

“Keep that up, and when I return from work, I’m putting that stupid guitar of yours in a woodchipper.”

“Fuck you.” He stood from his seat, scraping the bottom loudly against the floor. “Are we done here?”

“Young man-”

“Uzu!”

“You watch your *goddamn mouth* .”

“Yeah, looks like we’re done here.”

“Young man, you sit down *right this instant-* ”

It was too late. He slammed the door behind him as hard as he could, shaking the frame and dislodging a worrying amount of dust from the ceiling. Back pressed against the wood, he slid down onto the floor, curling up into himself. Voices through the wall were muffled by the soundproofing, but he knew Tsubo wouldn’t force him to talk anymore.

Something ugly caught in his chest and came out a sob. To his horror, he touched his face and came back wet. A second gasp escaped him, and then a third, made soggy by the tears that spilled down his face. The salt stung his scrapes and bruises, but there was nothing he could do now but clutch his knees to his chest and let everything flow out, wave after wave of snot and body shaking wheezes.

He didn’t know how long he’d been crying before his eyes and throat were too dry to keep going. He only knew that it was late, late, and there was the muffled noise of a conversation going on in the living room. Curiosity got ahold of him, and he cracked the door open, just wide enough to listen.

“... Texas feels a bit harsh, doesn’t it?” Tsubo sounded extremely hesitant.

“Oklahoma apparently has a good rehabilitation program. Weekly drug testing, intensive academic and physical training. That could work.” His mother’s voice crackled through the screen, but it was undeniably hers.

“There’s one in the Arizona desert, but it’s notoriously difficult to get into, and they require a history of arrests.” His father sounded pensive. “We’ll have to get him on a private flight, though, he might resist if he realizes what’s going on.”

“Can’t you just… send him to stay with our Uncle or something? I’m sure training or even just living in the countryside might do him well. Living in Japan might calm him down.”

“Tsubo, you make too many excuses for him.” Sanageyama Sr’s irritation came through loud and clear despite the shitty connection. “You understand, of course, that his disobedience has been happening under your care, and is then a reflection of you as a brother?”

Tsubo hesitated. “I still think military school is too much. He just needs some guidance…”

That was all Uzu needed to hear. He pulled the door shut with trembling hands, and reached for his phone instead.

Yo

Do u kno any1 i can stay w 4 a few weeks

Just gotta keep a low profile for a bit

“Uzu?”

“What do you want *now,* Tsubo.”

Tsubo’s voice was thin and hesitant. “I’m sorry for not sticking up for you more. I should have defended you.”

“You’re just trying to save your own ass.”

A pause. “Sid has been whining since you locked yourself in there. Be nice to girls, Uzu.”

“That’s not fair, and you know it.”

“She’s your dog. Let her in.”

Uzu reluctantly cracked his door open again just to be met with a faceful of fur. Sid pounced on him eagerly, enthusiastic in the way only big dogs who thought they were still puppies could be.

“Whoa, easy, girl.” Sid lapped at his face, and he found himself laughing despite everything. “At least someone here loves me.”

“Don’t say that.”

Sid put her head in his lap expectantly. Uzu sighed and started petting. “Sure feels like it.”

“Maybe we should talk.” Before he could protest, Tsubo opened the door wider, and immediately, Sid scrambled up and ran towards him, panting in excitement. “Oh, hey there, baby.”

Uzu snorted. “Et tu, Sid?”

“Don’t be dramatic. Do you want some hot chocolate?”

“I’d rather have some of that Jim Beam I know you keep in your closet.”

“Swiss Miss it is, then.”

An idea nudged at the back of his head. “I’ll make it.”

“Huh?” Tsubo froze where he stood. “You’re just gonna hock something up in mine, aren’t you?”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“No?”

Uzu laughed and stood, walking past him into the kitchen. Milk in the microwave to warm, check. Packets of overly sweet mix, check. He poured the mix into two mugs and rummaged around for the reddi-whip. He could hear Tsubo rummaging around in his room.

Perfect.

He ducked into the bathroom and immediately threw open the mirror cabinets. The apartment had been their parents’ place before it was theirs, and there was still plenty of evidence of them here- expired Vicodin, from his father’s broken collarbone, his mother’s contact solution… his eyes skimmed the rows of pills like a kid in a candy store. There should still have been some leftover Ambien in the bathroom cabinet. He squinted at the mass of orange plastic pill bottles, all half empty with multicolored capsules, before he spotted what he was looking for.

The pill melted into the hot chocolate like a stone sinking into a pond. His eyes darted around nervously, and he poured a tablespoon of sugar in after, just in case. A healthy serving of whipped cream on top, and nobody would know the difference.

Tsubo was sitting on the couch when he emerged, mugs in hand.

“You didn’t have to, y’know.”

Without looking up, he took the cup from him, and before Uzu could chicken out, buried his nose in the sugary mass of white froth and took a long drink. He could only stare at the bobbing of his adam’s apple, and the grimace at the bottom of the cocoa.

“You need to stop putting so much sugar in your hot chocolate, dude.”

“Sorry.” Uzu put down his own drink nervously. “It’s an old habit.”

“I guess those really do die hard.” Tsubo looked up thoughtfully. “Are you excited for Switzerland?”

Lying cheating traitor bastard.

“I bet there’s gonna be like, no internet.”

“Yeah, probably.” Tsubo shrugged. “Sorry. International schools can be strict.”

They drank in silence. The weight of the evening lay heavy on both their shoulders.

“What time is it?”

Uzu looked up at the clock his parents had left for them. “Half past one. Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering. It’s… been a long night.”

“I’d fucking say.”

“Swear j-” Tsubo paused, and then shook his head. “Eh, fuck it. We’ve both been pilfering from that jar all year anyway.”

Uzu barked out a forced laugh. “I knew it.”

“Yeah.”

The two brothers took coordinated sips from their drinks at the same time, avoiding eye contact with every atom of their being. For several excruciating minutes, no noise was made in the entire apartment but the sound of cold cocoa sloshing around in cups and the nasally sound of Sid’s breathing. Carefully, Uzu stood, the creaking of the floorboards loud like a gunshot in the awkward silence.

“Hey, Uzu.”

Tsubo’s words sounded the slightest bit slurred. He lay across the couch, eyes already starting to flutter.

“You’re a good kid, under all that rebellious teen bullshit. But maybe… maybe this’ll be good for you. I think some isolation will straighten you out-”

“Bite me.”

His smile faltered.

“Uzu, I’m just saying-”

He shook his head. “I don’t wanna hear it-”

“I just want you to be happy.”

“You just want me out of your hair-”

“I love you, you know?”

Guilt curdled in his stomach. Tsubo’s eyes fluttered again.

“... I love you too.”

“I’m just gonna…” Tsubo stretched out, yawning. “It’s been a taxing day. I’m going to bed.”

“Right.”

“Don’t even think about sneaking out tonight…” his words trailed off as he yawned again, eyelids heavy. “I’ll kill you.”

“I know. Sleep tight, bro.”

For the second time today, he waited only for the door to shut to immediately dart to his door. On his floor was a packed duffel bag, a backpack, and his bass, hard case and all. Nothing that would draw suspicion from someone walking around in Port Authority. The night was crisp, and he layered- a shirt, his favorite flannel, his oversized bomber jacket. His Docs, worn in and comfortable and safe, even as he moved his luggage onto the fire escape.

A soft whine caught his attention. Sid looked up at him, eyes wide, with one leg out the window.

“I’ll be back, girl. I swear, it’ll just be a few weeks.” He rubbed her head, and she nuzzled into his hand, warm, trusting. “Don’t bark, alright? Let Tsubo sleep. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Sid lay down on the floor, her head on her paws. He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile, and slid out, the night breeze ruffling his hair. By the time he was down in front, his friend was idling in his SUV, door open, waiting for him.

They stood in the doorway. Uzu jerked his thumb back over his shoulder.

“Please come rescue your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.” Nonon sounded exhausted. “And I just got back from dinner with my ‘rents. Aren’t you even gonna wish me a happy birthday?”

“You’re a Scorpio, and I’m trying to keep my distance. Prickly bunch, y’know.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

Behind them, Ryuko giggled hysterically.

“Please take her before she hurts herself or something,” Uzu whispered. “I told her to go easy on the bong, but *nooooooooo* .”

“Ugh.” Nonon peeked under his arm. “Ryuko, let’s go.”

“If mer means sea, and maid means girl, do you technically have to have a tail to be a mermaid if you live and breathe underwater? Is Sandy a mermaid?” Ryuko looked up at her, eyes bright red. “Why is she an astronaut too? Is this some sea space air land thing?”

“Alright, he’s rubbing off on you. Let’s go.” Nonon ducked around Uzu and grabbed ahold of her arm. “Jesus, how much did you smoke?”

“A… lot…”

“I can see that.” She tugged Ryuko’s arm over her shoulder with some difficulty. “C’mon, you dumb punk. I promise you you can walk if you focus.”

Uzu coughed. “You wanna come by later and have a few hits? I just resupplied.”

“Are you offering me birthday weed?” Nonon raised an eyebrow. “That’s… sweet of you.”

“If you want?”

But then Ryuko giggled and pressed her cheeks to Nonon’s.

“Hey. Miss me, Smurfette?”

“Did you get me a birthday present?”

“I have a few ideas.” Ryuko giggled and leaned in closer.

He looked away before their mouths fitted together. It felt like the right thing to do, recent events considered.

“You’re too stoned.” Nonon pulled away and looked up at Uzu. “I’ll swing by in a bit. How’s that?”

“Sounds good to me.” He offered her his most genuine smile, and something twinged in his stomach when she smiled despite herself. “Talk to you later. Grab four-eyes if you see him. Make sure she doesn’t hurt herself. Oh, and don’t let her watch any more Spongebob.”

“Got it.” Her eyes crinkled when she smiled, even if he knew it was probably a glass of wine softening her demeanor. “It’s my day. We gotta party.”

“It’s our God-given right.” Uzu concluded. “I think the Beastie Boys would approve.”

The college kids sitting on their luggage seemed a little taken aback by his size. “How old are you?”

“I swear, he’s cool,” his friend snapped. “He just needs a place to hang for a few weeks while shit cools down with his family.”

The college students looked amongst each other and shrugged. “We’re just spending a while up in Vermont- Jaylen's dad has a summer home there but they’re off vacationing in the South of France till August. It’s cool. Got a lake. Weed’s cheap. How old are you?”

“Almost sixteen,” Uzu said, and it was only half a lie.

“Cool, cool.” The guy nodded his head. “I’m Joe, that’s Jaylen, Kimmie, Cleo, Marianna, and Buck. We’re all pretty chill- just don’t be dumb, alright?”

“Yeah,” Uzu said, as if this weren’t an incredibly dumb idea already. “I’m Uzu.”

Joe squinted at him. “Sounds like ooze. Can I call you Junior?”

“I-” Uzu’s mouthed gaped. “Uh, sure?”

“Cool.” Joe hefted his bag over his shoulder. “You play?”

“Bass, and guitar.”

“Nice. We’ll have some live entertainment.”

“Yeah.” He looked up at the grimy ceiling of the bus terminal. Something told him he was going to miss this place.

Everything else went smoothly. Tickets, bought, Greyhound, boarded, and the sun was only really starting to come up when they set off. Morning light flooded the bus, earning groans from tired passengers.

The bus was only just pulling out of the Lincoln Tunnel when he remembered Yennifer’s performance was next Friday, and his chest felt empty, empty, empty.

Chapter End Notes

Again, apologies for the unexpected hiatus! No matter what happens with this fic, I will release the notes/ending if I ever decide not to finish it, but don't worry, there's no thoughts like that on the horizon. This AU is my *everything*.

As usual, questions can be sent to satsukichan on tumblr!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!